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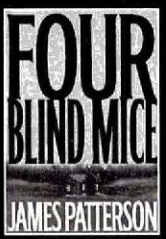

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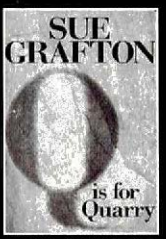

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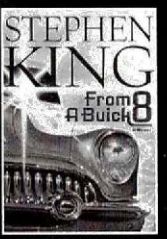

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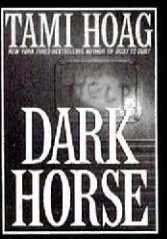

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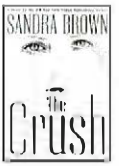

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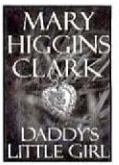

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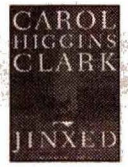

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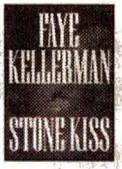

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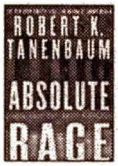

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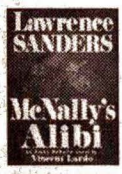

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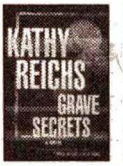

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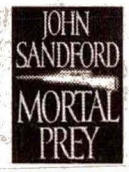

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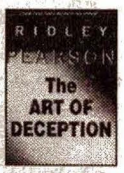

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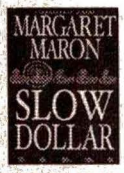

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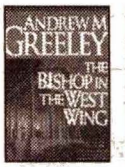

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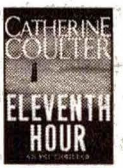

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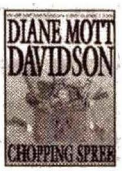

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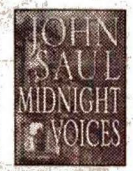

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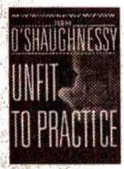

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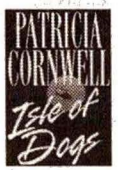

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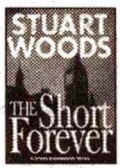

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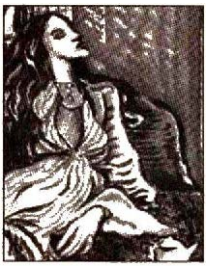

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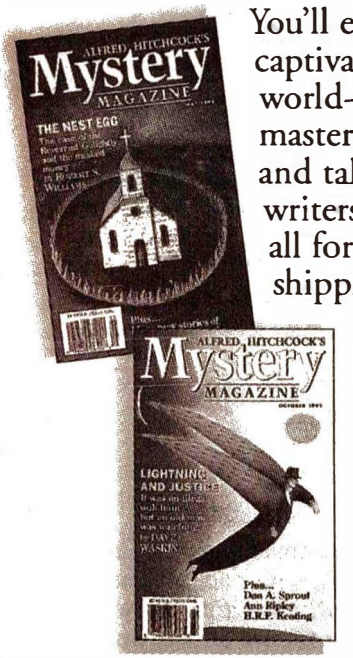

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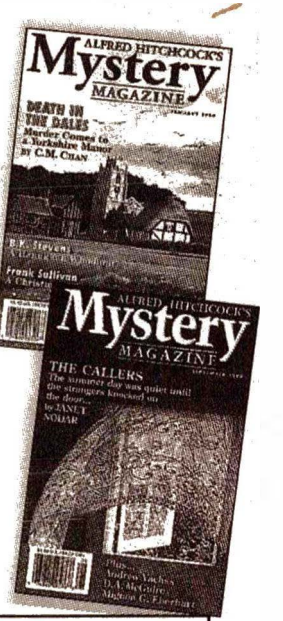

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Art by Mark Evans

THE DEATHS

by Joyce Carol Oates

1.

"Crissie? Hello."

The call came out of the void. That nasal voice so like her own. She could not have expected it, who had not thought of him in years. Instinctive now, unthinking in the way in which we maintain our balance if we begin to slip on ice, was her response to well-intentioned queries about her family: she had none.

Her mother had died of breast cancer when she, Crista, was six years old, and her father and nine-year-old brother had died in an automobile accident in Olcott, New York, her hometown, only a few weeks after her mother's death.

Such explanations, when she felt obliged to make them, she made, quietly. The dignity of her manner—even as a child Crista had cultivated dignity, out of repugnance for its opposite—forestalled pity. More important for Crista, it forestalled further questions.

How terrible for you . . .

Well, I was very young. I was taken in by an aunt. I didn't lack for love.

All of this was both true and not true. Certainly Crista had lacked for love, but she wasn't one to have expected love. Her original family had not been loving. Her father, maybe. At times. When not drinking. Her mother, Crista could not remember clearly.

For memory is a moral action, a choice. You can choose to remember. You can choose not.

Now the call. "Crissie? It's Henry."

As if he'd needed to identify himself.

"Of late, Oates can do no wrong. Deep in her career, she is pulling out the stops again," *PW* said in a review of the 2001 novel *Middle Age: A Romance.* Nearly forty years after the publication of her first book, Ms. Oates is enjoying not only the highest literary reputation but best-seller status—a rare combination. Her latest novel, *I'll Take You There,* was published in October by Ecco Press. †

For there was his voice, nasal, reedy, disagreeable to her ears, the unmistakable accent of western New York State she'd long tried to obliterate from her own speech. At once she'd recognized that voice. And there was "Crissie": no one had called her "Crissie" in the life after Olcott, New York. Meaning no one had called her that childhood name in more than twenty years.

Rapidly she calculated, even as she held the receiver to her ear trying to make sense of his imploring urgent words: it was June 2002 now, the deaths had occurred in June 1981. This meant Henry was thirty years old. Thirty!

She tried to envision him: a spindly-limbed nine-year-old with eyes dark and luminous as their father's, and their mother's fair, carroty-brown hair. Henry, an adult. In a way, it was not possible. Her brain clamped down against it.

Crista herself was twenty-seven. This seemed to her fully possible, probable. In fact, she felt older. Never would she become one of those tiresome individuals who profess, and perhaps actually feel, disbelief at their age. As a child of six she'd become an adult, and she had liked it. To be an adult—even as a child—is to exercise judgment, control. It's to successfully resist self-pity and to forestall pity, the most despicable of human responses, in others.

No one, not even a lover, in a succession of lovers, had been encouraged to call her "Crissie."

Yet there was the name, repeated. Punctuating her brother's conversation. Forcing her to acknowledge, yes, she was the sister he could think of only as "Crissie," for indeed it would have been

unnatural for him to have called her "Crista," as it would have been unnatural, impossible, for either of them as children to have called their parents by their first names.

Young parents they'd been. Married young, and having their babies young. Very young to have died: in their early thirties.

Crista was "Crista Ward." Her aunt had adopted her. Henry remained "Henry Eley," the old surname. She would wonder how he'd looked her up but supposed their aunt had informed him where Crista had moved. She resented it, but would never speak of it to their aunt, who had only meant well.

Henry was asking, "Can we see each other? I think it's time."

Crista's response was instinctive, unthinking. "Why?"

An unexpected response, and unanswerable. Henry was silent for a moment. If their conversation was a Ping-Pong game, Henry had failed to return his opponent's fiercely placed ball, he'd failed even to see it flying at him.

Henry said, not so much arguing as presenting his case, and the logic of his case, "Because I'm here, in the Northeast, Crissie. And it's been so long. Mostly I live in the Bay Area. San Francisco. I was thinking I'd like to rent a car, and drive to see you, and the two of us could drive up to Olcott together, to the lake. We could do that."

Crista could not believe the words she was hearing.

"You haven't been back, have you?" Henry paused, as if hearing Crista's murmured reply, though in fact she said nothing, nor even framed words of reply. "I haven't, either. Of course."

Crista said, "I'm going to hang up now."

"Wouldn't you want to? Revisit Olcott? After so long? June nineteenth, nineteen eighty-one."

Crista hung up.

No. Never.

Though she understood that, throughout her life, she'd been awaiting such a call. From her lost brother Henry, or from someone. (In that twilight consciousness between sleep and waking, surely it was her parents she awaited. Their voices, their hands on her. Where their young attractive faces had been, Crista's memory could provide only blurs, like faces seen through wavy glass, or underwater. In the worst of the dreams, Crista opened her eyes wide and was blind. The wider she opened her eyes, the more helplessly blind.)

Possibly some of the belligerence in her character originated in this: she'd been awaiting a call, an explanation. She was owed this. A revelation. It was like waiting for a phone to ring—the phone would not ring. Except if you left, the phone would ring, and

you would miss your opportunity, if only to repudiate the call and the caller and to replace the receiver. Thank you. No.

Now the phone had rung. The call had come. But it was her brother, who knew no more than she why what had happened to them had happened. Her brother who could not know more than she knew. (For how could he? She refused to believe this might be possible, though he was three years older.) Her brother who could not tell her what she wanted to hear. *Your father did not kill your mother. Another person killed her on the beach. Your father died because he couldn't bear the loneliness. His death was an accident.*

Yet that call, that revelation, had never come. She was ready, long she'd been ready to hear it. But it had not come. Another call had come in its place, unwanted.

Aloud she vowed, "No. Never."

Yet: three days later, there was Crista Ward waiting on the front stoop of her apartment building for her brother Henry Eley whom she had not seen in twenty-one years. He'd called back, and Crista must have weakened and changed her mind. Somehow, this had happened.

It wasn't like Crista, such a reversal. Still, it had happened.

She was dressed casually yet elegantly. Pale linen trousers, a silk blouse, and a fine-knit cotton sweater. These were designer sports clothes of understated quality, not conspicuous. She wore her hair that was a faded red-brown, prematurely threaded with silver, trimmed very short and curled against her head tight as a cap, needlessly clamped in place with a rodlike silver barrette behind her left ear. This was Crista Ward's distinctive look: calculated, stylish, nothing left to chance.

She was bringing a single overnight bag. For they had to stay overnight, the drive was too far otherwise. Crista supposed they would find a motel at Olcott Beach. She seemed to remember motels in that area, a middle-income resort area. Along the pebbly southern shore of Lake Ontario, numerous small motels. They'd made no definite plans beforehand, at least Crista didn't know of any plans her brother Henry might have made. They would revisit the old cottage on the lake—from a distance, probably, since strangers would be living in it now—and they would walk along the beach. They would talk together, become reacquainted. Why? Crista wondered. It was just as well Crista had no lover at the present time. She could not have explained to him why.

My lost brother. I must love him.

Olcott Beach retained in her memory an aura of festivity, excitement. There was a boardwalk overlooking the lake, there were amusement rides: Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, bumper cars. High-pitched tinkly music. Food smells, hot and greasy. She and

Henry had been taken on the rides by—who? The adult figures were blurred. One was meant to be Mommy, the other had to be Daddy. When she tried to see, she could not. Vividly she recalled the taste of pink cotton candy, though. Root beer, chocolate Tastee-Freeze in cones. She never ate sweets now, disliked the taste of sugar. Rather swallow a mouthful of ground glass than a mouthful of sugar.

Henry had planned to arrive by 11 A.M. He was driving north to Albany from New York City where he'd been staying for several days. Yet it was 11:20 A.M. when at last he drove up to the curb. By which time Crista was feeling fierce, indignant. Her first words to the man she took to be her brother were: "You're late. I've been waiting out here, and you're late." Why she'd chosen to wait outside, instead of in her apartment on the sixth floor, she had no idea.

The bearded man, grayer-haired than she'd envisioned, and thinner-faced, stared at her for a long moment as if disbelieving. Then he smiled, a smile that struck her as both boyish and aggressive, and said, "Crissie? *You?* Climb in."

She did. She would think afterward she'd had her choice of telling him she wasn't going with him after all, she'd changed her mind, but instead, face smarting as if she'd been slapped, she climbed into the car. Cheap compact rental car, she'd bumped her head on the doorframe. She could have wept. *This isn't Henry. I don't know this man.* She fumbled to take the hand extended to her. For a moment she was fearful of crying. Her heart beat in fury, refusing to cry. The bearded man was marveling, "Well. Crissie. Look at you." His eyes may have glistened with tears. His teeth shone with smiling. He was trying to embrace her, while Crista held herself stiff, not pointedly resisting yet not acquiescing, holding her breath against the sudden smell of him, unkempt hair, straggly bearded, T-shirt and denim vest that needed laundering; she'd retreated somewhere inside herself, that familiar place, a light becoming smaller, ever smaller, close to extinction.

Look at you. It was an adult voice yet immediately recognizable. The voice of Crista's lost brother, she had not seen since she was six years old.

After *the deaths,* the children were taken in by relatives. Crista went to live with her mother's older sister whom she knew as Aunt Ellen and Henry went to live with his father's parents. There may have been a wish expressed by the children—Crista seemed to remember this, for she'd loved her older brother Henry very much—that they might live together. But neither Aunt Ellen nor Grandma and Grandpa Eley wanted both children. There was the expense. There was the responsibility. There was the belief that, so

long as the children were raised apart, they would cease to remember *the deaths* more readily.

The deaths: this was what it was called. The cataclysmic event of June 19, 1981, when Rick Eley killed his wife Lorraine with a claw hammer, smashing her skull as she ran screaming from him on the beach at Olcott, and when Rick Eley subsequently killed himself by driving his car into a highway abutment later that night.

Logical to think then, as Crista grew to do, that *the deaths* had occurred at the same time. Not one death on the beach down beyond the Eleys' cottage on Lake Ontario, and, about forty minutes later, and fifteen miles away, the other.

The deaths. The deaths. Not *murder, suicide* but *the deaths.*

In time, in Crista's reasoning, her brother would be absorbed into *the deaths,* too. Exactly when this happened, how old, or young, Crista was, she wouldn't afterward recall. For Aunt Ellen never spoke of Henry, it was as if he'd vanished. If vanished, died. Telling her account of her childhood to others, which was always brief, seemingly impersonal, Crista would say that her mother had died of breast cancer (for so many women, mothers of school friends and acquaintances, seemed to die of or be stricken by cancer, this was a logical explanation), and that her father and nine-year-old brother Henry had died in an automobile accident only a few weeks afterward.

How terrible for you . . .

Well, I was very young.

Sometimes, not often but sometimes, Crista felt a pang of guilt for having killed Henry off. In the car crash with their father south of Lockport that same night. And why had she done it?—she hadn't wanted to talk about him. She hadn't wanted to think about him. She hadn't wanted strangers to her life to inquire too closely into her life. She dreaded the inevitable prying query. *You and your brother must be very close, you must see each other often?*

Crista's mother's older sister Ellen Ward had been a public schoolteacher in Utica, New York. Unmarried, which was convenient. Her father's parents, devastated by what their son had allegedly done to his wife and to himself, moved from the small city of Lockport where they'd been living and resettled in Cincinnati. The driving distance between the households was less than six hundred miles but would seem to have been six thousand miles. Never were the children taken to see each other, and they were not encouraged to write or to speak on the phone. The adults became estranged from one another as well. What had Aunt Ellen to do with the Eleys? *She* had not married into that family.

Strange how at first Crista cried herself to sleep every night, she'd missed her mommy and her daddy and her brother Henry so

badly, but then suddenly, overnight it seemed, she was forgetting. Since Aunt Ellen refused to speak of *the deaths* it was natural to begin to forget. Where there are no words, there memory cannot take root. By the first heavy snowfall in November, the child was well into forgetting. By the turn of the year, numbness had taken hold. Numbness like the falling snow. Numbness like sinking into sleep, in snow. Numbness that crept into her mittened hands, and into her booted feet. Wool mittens, wool socks, and waterproof rubber boots were not sufficient to keep out this numbness. For it was a delicious numbness, too.

No family? None?

I was taken in by an aunt. I didn't lack for love.

2.

They were speeding westward across the hilly underpopulated breadth of New York State. On the map, their destination was a pinprick on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. Crista kept checking the map as if fearful of losing it: Olcott. Henry talked.

"Are you surprised to see me, Crissie? I mean, to see *me*. As I am."

"No. Not really."

"I look the way you'd imagined me? Really?"

Her brother was right to doubt Crista: for of course she wasn't telling the truth. It wouldn't have occurred to her to speak the truth, for that wasn't her practice. As a lawyer, in the hire of a large Albany firm, one of a team of lawyers, she was accustomed to dealing in expediencies, not truths.

In fact, she was shocked by her brother's appearance. Shocked and disconcerted. She was wishing she'd never agreed to see him. She was wishing he'd never called her, she'd hung up the phone on both his calls. She was wishing he didn't exist.

Henry, her brother she'd adored. He could not have weighed more than one hundred thirty-five pounds. He was tall, perhaps five feet ten, yet emaciated. Willfully so, you could see. His beard was unkempt as an old brush, and prematurely graying. His hair was thinning at the crown of his head, falling to his shoulders. A sly skinny ferret-face out of which ghoul eyes shone. Shallow chest, a maddening Christly manner. His skin was sallow and, on the cheeks, acne-scarred. His voice grated like sandpaper. Every utterance was a tease. Within five minutes Henry had identified himself to his sister he hadn't seen in twenty-one years as a Citizen of the World, but nominally a Citizen of the United States. He was a vegetarian, a licensed practitioner/instructor of yoga. He'd been living in northern California since the age of seventeen when he'd "fled" Cincinnati. He was manager and part-owner of a "locally renowned" organic food store/restaurant in Oakland and

he was "on TV, sometimes, cable, discussing the yoga way of life." He'd been in Manhattan, in fact, being filmed for a documentary, and delivering a second manuscript to his publisher. He said, "That's my first book, Crissie, on the backseat. I mean, it's for you. It's gone into eight printings since last September."

Crista was surprised: the book was an attractive paperback published by Ballantine. *Yoga, the Art of Living Life* by H.S. Eley. On the dedication page was inscribed in red ink *For My Beloved Sister Crissie E. After Long Absence. Always, Your Brother Henry. 18 June 2002.*

Crista murmured, "Thank you."

She leafed through the book's pages without seeing a word. She would never read it. Yoga! Ridiculous. She was feeling cheated: her brother had had his life apart from her. A northern California life. A wholly invented life. Her older brother who should have protected her had forgotten her, obviously. He'd obliterated her, as she had obliterated him. Easier to imagine the child Crissie dead. One of *the deaths.*

Henry said, in that grating-teasing way of his, casting her a sidelong ferret look, "*You* look terrific, Crissie. You're beautiful like Lorraine was. Except your hair . . ."

Lorraine! Crista felt a small shock.

"What's wrong with my hair?"

"It's so, somehow, sculpted. It doesn't seem real. Is it?"

Before Crista could prevent him, Henry actually reached out and touched—fingered—her hair. She recoiled from him, offended.

"Sculpted things are real." Crista spoke adamantly, in her logical-lawyer voice. "Sculpted things are no less real than nonsculpted things."

She was surprising him, she saw. Good! If Henry had been thinking of her as his baby sister, the one who'd been permanently traumatized by *the deaths,* he would have to modify his thinking.

Henry said, gently, "But your eyes, Crissie."

"What about my eyes?"

"Lorraine's eyes. I saw that immediately."

"No."

"Certainly, yes. You have her features."

"That's ridiculous. I do not."

"Crissie, you do."

"I do *not.*"

Crista was staring at the map. Throbbing with indignation.

"And I wish you wouldn't call me 'Crissie,' do you mind? No one else does."

"But no one else is your brother."

He meant this jokingly. He was trying to make her laugh. Tickle her as long ago she'd been tickled, the baby of the family. They had

all loved her. Crissie, the sweetest prettiest little girl. All that was finished now, of course. Yet, Henry would remember. "You're a lawyer, Aunt Ellen said?"

Crista shrugged. On the map she was moving her neatly filed unpolished fingernail along the thruway, westward past Syracuse, the Finger Lake region, Rochester. They would exit beyond Rochester, and take a country highway north to Lake Ontario. In twenty-one years she had never returned. As an adolescent of fifteen, sixteen, she'd thought briefly of returning, but had not. *To walk along the beach. To run. In the direction she'd run.*

As in adolescence we torment and comfort ourselves with thoughts of suicide. A punishment to expiate all sins: our own, and those that have been perpetrated upon us.

"A lawyer. 'Corporate.' In Albany?" Henry laughed, that sandpaper sound. He had no idea how abrasive and disagreeable the sounds that issued from him were, there was a curious sexual complacency to him. A man to whom women were attracted? What sort of women? Crista saw with repugnance his fingers gripping the steering wheel, like talons. "You like that lifestyle, do you, Crissie?"

Crista was tempted to say, *No. I hate it. I've made it my life because I hate it, asshole.*

Aloud she said, "You know nothing about my 'lifestyle,' Henry."

"You're not married, eh."

This wasn't even a question. Crista didn't trouble to respond.

"I'm not, either. Never will be." Henry laughed. "Not *me*."

He knew where she'd gone to college, and where to law school, their aunt had told him. He'd dropped out of San Francisco State after three semesters, know why?

His voice was smug, insufferable. "Information isn't knowledge. Knowledge is deeper than facts."

Crista said, annoyed, "You don't learn just facts in college. Not a good college. You learn methods. You learn how to think. You learn wisdom."

" 'Wisdom'!" Henry laughed heartily.

Crista knew better than to quarrel, she was not one to be drawn into idiotic quarrels, yet she heard herself say, "I *did*. I read philosophy, I read Shakespeare. I read the tragedies. I read everything I could. Our parents were uneducated but I was determined that I would be educated, and I'm far from coming to the end of all that I need to know."

Crista was breathless. As a lawyer she often made such spirited speeches on behalf of a client, yet never had she made such a speech on her own behalf. But Henry was unimpressed.

"What you need to know, Crissie, is with*in*."

" 'Within'—what? My skull? My navel? What do yogins meditate on, isn't it their navels?"

Crista spoke with shocking hostility, but Henry laughed. " 'Attention is the appeal of the soul to itself.' Meditation is many things, Crissie. You could do worse than begin with your navel."

His manner was so jokey, so unpleasantly intimate, Crista steeled herself, halfway expecting him to throw out his hand and grab and tickle at her belly. Instead, Henry did something yet more maddening: he began to hum to himself. Pushing his lank graying Christly hair out of his eyes and humming until the very car vibrated. They were passing exits for MEDINA, CHILDS.

Crista stared out the window, clutching at the map. How she despised whoever this was, this ridiculous man masquerading as her brother she'd adored.

Crissie! Come here.

He was screaming at her. Dragging her somewhere. Beneath the porch? She tried to fight him but he had hold of her wrists, her wrists would be bruised, he was so much stronger. The sweaty palm of his hand clamped over her mouth.

Had she seen what had happened farther up the beach, she had not because it was too dark. There was no moon, it was too dark. Waves breaking at the shore, rolling up hissing onto the packed sand, froth and foam and seaweed and the small lifeless gleaming-silver bodies of fish.

She was just a little girl, no one scolded her for shrieking and giggling when the chilly foamy water washed over her bare toes like nibbling fish.

Had she seen, she had not. Hadn't seen, and hadn't heard. Had not heard the woman who was her mother screaming for help.

"My brother? He died when he was nine."

There was never anyone to whom she could speak of Henry. Shrewdly she'd erased him from all accounts of herself. While she'd lived in Utica with her fussy schoolteacher aunt she had not been encouraged to remember that she had a brother, still less to beg to see him. "All that," her aunt said, with an annoyed flutter of her hands, as you might wave away flies, "all that is finished." Aunt Ellen was one who could not even bring herself to refer to *the deaths.*

Hard to believe now, Crista had initially loved that woman. Desperately. A teacher of junior high English who gave Crista books to read, books and books, helped her with arithmetic. A stocky-bodied twitchy-faced woman with eyes like nickels who took satisfaction in her niece's good grades at school, which reflected well upon her.

In early adolescence, Crista decided she hated her aunt.

Why? Why not.

Once she left Utica, and began the process of forgetting, she'd ceased to feel much emotion of any kind for the woman. *All that is finished.* She saw the logic of such a statement, it was only a fact. Yet, as a sentimental gesture, she invited her aunt to her law school commencement in Ithaca, for there were no other relatives to invite, and when the woman arrived, a woman of late middle age, frankly fat by this time, panting and overdressed and bearing spots of rouge on her sallow cheeks like a deranged clown, Crista had behaved coolly and politely as if she scarcely knew her. When her aunt said, clutching at Crista's hands, eyes suddenly leaking tears, "Your mother would be so proud of you, dear, if—if only—" Crista turned away unhearing. And afterward when her lover of that time asked her about her aunt, Crista explained that the old woman wasn't an "actual" aunt, only just a friend of the family.

She would never make a sentimental gesture again. That, she'd learned.

As a boy at Olcott, Henry had run with a pack of boys his age. Some of them were summer residents at the beach and others, like Crista's family, were year-round residents who lived in bungalows and winterized cottages overlooking the lake. (Their father worked for Niagara County: road repair, snow removal. He was paid to watch over cottages owned by summer residents.) Henry had been a happy-seeming boy. He'd been loud, pushy, aggressive. A rough boy, with other boys. By nine he'd seemed to her one of the older boys: he rode a bicycle, he swam, dived off the wharf at Olcott Beach. He seemed to her physically fearless. In his play with other boys he was frequently dominant. Carroty-brown hair and a stocky sturdy tanned body, and strong. Only around their father had Henry been quiet, watchful. Deferential. If Henry gave their father what their father called "lip" the air crackled with excitement. ("Give me any of your lip, you little cocksucker, and your ass will be warmed, got it?") The danger increased when their father had been drinking, but you couldn't always tell when he'd been drinking. It was like easing out onto the frozen lake: you couldn't tell when the ice would begin to crack and buckle beneath your feet.

Rarely was there a warning from their father, and never an apology afterward. Their mother tried to intervene, in her weak pleading voice. *Honey, please! He didn't mean it . . .*

For some reason, Crista would always remember, it was crucial among all the households of that stretch of road above the lake that children be respectful to their fathers. You were risking catastrophe, like tossing lighted matches at spilled gasoline, to invite misunderstandings. Boys especially. Boys were vulnerable. Boys were apt to talk back, to give their fathers "lip." Sometimes, a boy

like Henry had only to squirm and to scowl in his father's presence to incur his father's wrath. *Little bastard. I saw that, think I'm blind? C'mere.*

Crissie was such a little girl, and such a big-eyed pretty little girl, naturally she was Daddy's favorite. Daddy never punished his favorite little girl who was so pretty and shy in his company, adorable as a doll.

Crista recalled some of this. Faces flicking past like rapidly dealt playing cards. The faces of her father and mother (so young! it was heartbreaking to realize how young) she didn't retain, as she did not retain the sight of the bloodied claw hammer in her father's fist. But the face of her boy-brother she saw clearly. She saw it, inside the face of this ridiculous bearded man with the acne-scarred cheeks. A child-face, trapped inside the other. She wanted to accuse him.

You turned out like this to spite us. You did it on purpose. You aren't even a man, the way our father was a man. You're more like a woman. Like our mother.

"Storm clouds, see? Like old times at the lake."

He spoke with wry satisfaction. One of those who welcomed things turning out badly, to demonstrate his equanimity in the face of disappointment.

For by the time they approached the lake at Olcott in the late afternoon, the sky overhead was layered in gauzy strips of cloud. Above the almost invisible farther shore, in Ontario, Canada, were white, wind-braided mares'-tails stretching for miles. Storm clouds.

At the lake, weather changed with notorious swiftness. You could take nothing for granted. Sudden chill winds out of the north, thunderstorms and dangerous summer squalls. A pelting of rain turning to sleet like nails against the roof of their cottage was an old memory of Crista's. The storm-ravaged lake. Angry waves breaking on the littered sand.

Once you lived on the lake, people said, all that empty space to look out on, you never wanted to live anywhere else.

As Henry approached Olcott Beach on the county highway, Crista was beginning to see that things were wrong. Not right. A boarded-up gas station, a run-down Day's Inn. Businesses along the highway didn't look very prosperous. Where was the Tastee-Freeze stand? Where were the summer residents? Crista said guardedly, "Maybe—we shouldn't be here."

For a long moment Henry didn't reply, as if he too were disoriented. Then he said, with an older brother's annoying insouciance, "Where else? Where else should we be?"

"That isn't the point." Crista was becoming nervous. Children on

bicycles were pedaling on the wrong side of the highway, very near the right fender of Henry's car. She saw no sign of the Ferris wheel. The roller coaster. Unless the amusement park was in the other direction, and she'd forgotten.

Well, the old school was still there: Olcott Elementary. Weather-worn and drab but still there, on the corner of . . .

Their old road, Post Road, running parallel to the lake, was still just gravel and dirt, unpaved. But there was a trailer park on a stretch of what had been vacant land, about a block from the beach. And the beach at this end of town, what Crista could see of it, was looking badly eroded.

This was the poorer side of Olcott. The larger houses and summer cottages were in the other direction. Post Road hadn't prospered in the intervening years. Far from being built up and developed, as Crista had dreaded, it was becoming derelict. A number of the cottages were boarded up, abandoned. FOR SALE signs looked as if they'd been stuck in the ground for years.

Crista said, for Henry's benefit, "It's the economy. We're in a recession upstate. There aren't any jobs."

Henry protested, "But it's the *lake.* Look at that *view.*"

Their house. The "winterized" cottage. Someone had added a carport and painted the clapboards dark green, but this hadn't been recent, for the paint was peeling and the roof looked rotted. There was a gas drum behind the kitchen area, badly rusted. There was a pile of debris. Broken things. "It's empty," Henry said, relieved.

Locked up, the windows sealed over with duct tape and polyethylene sheeting. Crista said, with lawyerly attentiveness, "It isn't for sale, though. I don't see a sign."

She was trying to speak calmly. This was an ordinary conversation they were having.

Henry parked the car. Neither made a move to get out.

Henry said, "Here we are."

Henry said, making an effort not to sound accusing, "Strange—you never came back here, Crissie. When you lived so close."

"Albany isn't close. Albany is all the hell away across the state."

All the hell. Away across the state. Crista was shocked, she never spoke like this.

They got out. No one was near. In the near distance, children were shouting. Though the wind on the lake was picking up, and whitecaps were visible, still there were sailboats some distance from shore. But no one on the ravaged beach below the road. Cottages adjacent to their old cottage appeared to be in no better condition. Crista breathed in the fresh air, hoping to clear her head and her lungs. She was having difficulty breathing, as if tiny seeds or bits of lint had accumulated in her lungs.

Henry said, pointing, "The old TV antenna."

"It wouldn't be ours. After so long."

"Why not? I bet it is."

Crista was tempted to peer through a window. But the ugly plastic sheeting was a deterrent. "The carport is new, though."

"No. Dad built that carport."

"He did? He . . . I don't think so."

"We kept our bikes under it. You had a, what do you call it, a little kid's bike, three wheels . . ."

"Tricycle."

"Right. And my bike, we kept back here."

The carport had no foundation, only just chunky gravel through which weeds had grown. At the rear of the carport was another mound of debris including sheets of plasterboard sprouting nails. Needlessly Crista said, "No car. They're not home."

"They haven't been home for a while. See the crap in the mailbox."

It was on the floor of the sagging porch, too. Water-stained advertising fliers, torn brochures. Henry stepped cautiously onto the porch, which creaked beneath his weight. Beneath the porch was a narrow, shadowy space. Crista was remembering that space: as a child, she'd crawled under the porch. She'd peered out from the shadows into the bright sunshine. She'd seen the feet and bare legs of adults. *Crissie? Where are you?*

Before Crista could prevent him, Henry tried the door of the cottage. Luckily, it was locked. He said, "This was where it began. Just inside the door. He'd just come home. It was late. She came to unlock the door because she'd locked it against him, he was yelling at her to let him in. He was drunk. I was still in bed, I didn't see him get the hammer from the closet. Or maybe he brought it in from outside. The carport."

Crista said, "There wasn't any carport. It didn't exist."

"Or out of a drawer. In the kitchen. He had it." Henry paused, stroking his straggly beard. His voice was strangely thrilled, tremulous. "I heard her scream before she was hit. Because she knew what was going to happen."

Crista said, "No. She struck him first. She had the hammer. I saw."

Henry stared at her. "*You* saw? How?"

"I was awake. I was watching. I heard the car. I heard him calling for the door to be unlocked."

"*I* was awake, I was standing behind Mom. You weren't even out of bed."

"She struck him first. She had the hammer, out of the closet. She had it ready, she had it raised, when he broke the door in."

"He didn't break the door. It was just the screen door."

"The screen door. It was latched, and he kicked it in."

"But he had the hammer, Crista. He came in with it. She was wearing just a nightgown. A short nightgown, with lace straps. She was afraid of him. She'd been on the phone with somebody, then she'd gone to bed. We were all in bed. You were sleeping when it began, you were just a baby."

"Oh no. I saw it." Crista stepped onto the porch and took hold of the screen door and shook it. The screen was badly rusted. Both the screen door and the inner door were locked. "She was awake, and waiting for him. She'd been drinking, too. Nobody wanted to say, how our mother drank. It was just beer, but she drank. She'd been on the phone with somebody she knew, some man. You never knew, but I knew. I'd seen them together. They'd meet places, like at the 7-Eleven. Nobody wanted to say, afterward. She'd been crying, carrying on. When he came home, she came at him with the hammer. She hit him, he got it away from her—"

"Crissie, you're wrong. You never saw that."

"He wrenched the hammer out of her hand, because she was going to kill him. He got it from her—"

"It wasn't like that, God damn it. He dragged her outside. He had the hammer, and he dragged her outside and was hitting her. She was already screaming. She broke away from him, and he chased her down onto the beach. She was barefoot, in just her nightgown. He tore it off her. I saw."

"*I* saw. I was awake, and I was watching. She had the hammer, he took it from her. She said things to him. She provoked him. She laughed at him, she was always laughing at him. She wanted to kill him."

"He was the one who was drunk. He'd come home drunk."

"She was drunk. He swung at her, to scare her off. He didn't mean to hit her."

Henry laughed angrily. "Of course he meant to hit her! He'd hit her plenty of times before. He hit me, and he even hit you. For wetting the bed."

"He did not. My father never touched me."

"Lots of times he did. It wasn't just her and me."

"He loved me. He loved me best."

"Maybe he did. So what! He was a drunk, and he was an asshole, and I'm glad he killed himself, he should have killed himself a long time before. Mom was the one who tried to protect us."

"She provoked him. There was this man who'd come over, when Daddy was away . . ."

"They were all friends. There were lots of people. They drank out on the beach. They were young."

Crista, stepping from the porch, was demonstrating the hammer swing. There was no hammer in her hand but she could see it, and she could feel its weight. Henry was staring at her as if he could

see it, too. Crista said, "Like this! She came at him swinging. She came at him, like this."

Crista swung the invisible claw hammer back behind her head, and over, in a swift deadly arc. Henry leapt out of the way of the blow.

"Crista! You're crazy."

"Because I didn't see what you saw? I know what I saw."

"You saw nothing. You were back inside the house. *I* saw."

"I saw her swing at him, and I saw him take the hammer from her. She ran away from him, and he followed her, and I—I didn't see anything after that, it was too dark."

Henry said, "Look, there were witnesses. Even if they didn't see, they could hear. All along the road. He was shouting at her, he was going to kill her. People would tell police, Rick Eley had been hitting and threatening his wife for months. We all knew he'd hurt her seriously one day. We thought he'd hurt the children, too."

Crista said stubbornly, "Daddy meant just to scare her off. That was all he meant."

"He broke her skull! But that wasn't enough, he kept hitting her with the hammer. I wish I'd been big enough and strong enough to stop him but I wasn't. He was sobbing, and cursing. He called her all the names. She was dying, and he called her all the names. That's the kind of asshole murderer he was. Son of a bitch murderer. *You* weren't here. You were hiding up at the house."

"I heard it. I heard her screaming at him, how she hated him."

"He left her down by the water. He left her half naked—our mother. Her skull was smashed, there was blood all over, a trail of blood. He smashed her brains out. Then he came for us."

"She was the one who'd started it, Henry. She provoked him."

"He was the one with the woman friends."

"I heard them arguing—"

"I heard them arguing—"

"She accused him—"

"He accused her—"

"She caused it."

"He was the murderer."

They were speaking sharply to each other. Henry gripped Crista's shoulders, and shook her. Crista shoved him away: she wasn't a weak young woman, her shoulder and arm and leg muscles were small but hard, well developed. They were on the beach, Crista stumbling from Henry. Their feet sank into the wet packed sand. A sudden stench of rotted kelp, fish, clam shells. Everywhere were shards of glass, beer cans, Styrofoam cups. Higher up, on a gravel road perpendicular with Post, several children straddling bicycles were watching. Henry said, furiously, "He wanted us to go

with him. He came back to get us, there was blood on his hands and that's why there was blood on us. Know what he said?"

Crista was pressing her hands against her ears. She hadn't heard a word her brother had said.

"He said, 'How'd you kids like some Tastee-Freeze?' He tried to grab us. You were out of bed by now, and outside, you were in just pajamas, and he grabbed you. It was around one A.M. He wanted to take us with him in the car, the son of a bitch wanted to kill us, too."

"He did not. I don't remember any of that."

"Look, he tried to drag you into the car with him. That's why there was blood on you. You were screaming. You knew what he was going to do. You were only six, but you knew."

"I—didn't know. I didn't see any of it."

"I pulled you away from him. I got you out of his hands. I dragged you with me under the porch. We hid under the porch. That's what saved us. We were hiding under the porch in the dirt and he was too drunk and crazy to get hold of us, he drove away in the car and left us and that's why we were saved, that's the only damn reason we're alive today."

Crista laughed. This was so ridiculous.

"I hate you! I wish you were dead, too."

"You're hysterical."

Henry would have grabbed her except Crista was too quick for him. Her hand leapt out, her nails raked his face. Blood appeared on his pitted cheeks like astonished cries. Henry swore, and shoved Crista hard, and she stumbled but didn't fall, thinking *The children are watching: witnesses.* Even in her fear and confusion she was thinking like a lawyer. She backed off, seeing the fury in his face. Who was this ghoul-eyed bearded man, advancing upon her? She ran, her feet sinking in the sand. Ran along the littered beach in the rain, her elbows at her sides, sobbing and laughing to herself.

When had it begun to rain? Within minutes the sky was dark, the lake had become choppy and agitated.

Instinctively she knew where to run: that sandy spit of land thick with saplings. There was a decayed log that had been there for decades. Crista crouched behind the log, hoping to hide. It was raining harder. Rain on the heaving surface of the lake like machine-gun bullets, sprayed. She heard someone calling *Crissie? Crissie?* headed in her direction. ●

Farber Catches a Falling Star

by Gordon Cotler

Unlike many recent fictional cops, Gordon Cotler's Lieutenant Farber of the NYPD is an all-around nice guy. His cases are mostly classical whodunits; his Watson is his wife Sylvie, who yearns for the details of his investigations but knows she'll have to wait till he's good and ready to discuss them. This time out, Farber is called on to solve a celebrity murder in a hotel where an old friend is in charge of security. †

Farber was mildly surprised three years ago when Jim Gerrity, a workhorse detective lieutenant on a solid career track, opted off the job for one at the Imperial Grand, the hotel behemoth off Madison in the Fifties. "Why do you want to be a house dick," Farber asked back then, and more than once, "when you have a shot at borough commander?"

"Will you stop saying 'house dick'?" Gerrity pleaded, also more than once. "I'll be director of security. I'll have a staff. I'll wear a pressed suit and shined shoes. And the wife and I can come in any weekend and stay on the cuff in an empty suite."

"And that's it?" Farber asked. "You'd sell your soul for a paper band across your toilet seat?"

"That's not the point. The point is"—and here came the shameful confession—"it's the pressure. Lately I find I can't handle the pressure on the job. The I.G. gets a world-class clientele. No hookers in the lobby, no con artists in the bar. My heaviest responsibility will be making sure the room doors are locked."

Gerrity found out about pressure and about locked doors when he was less than a month into his shined shoes, Farber discovered to his secret pleasure one morning in the *News*. "Listen to this," he called to his wife, who was at the toaster. He often caught Sylvie

up on what was in the papers, payment for his guilt at monopolizing both the *Times* and the *News* at breakfast. "Jim Gerrity's hotel?"

"The Imperial Grand," Sylvie nodded.

"This item'll do them no good. You know Senator Chalfont?"

"What is this, *Jeopardy?* From one of the Western states. The environmentalist."

"His wife burst into his suite last night and caught him *in flagrante delicious.*"

"That's *delicto,*" said Sylvie, a literalist who owned a bookstore.

"Either way, she caught him in the sack with his administrative assistant."

"Oh, my." Sylvie swooped the toast to the table, torn between her appetite for gossip and her concern for Gerrity. "The wife 'burst in'? Isn't Jim supposed to make sure the room doors are locked?"

"The door *was* locked. She had a key. She got it from the desk by announcing herself as Mrs. Chalfont and asking for one."

"You mean anyone can just go up to a desk clerk—" Sylvie stopped to read her husband's sly grin. "Of course. Senator Chalfont's wife is Helen Morell."

"Exactly. When the request for a key comes from a movie star she gets any key she wants."

"So Jim Gerrity is off the hook."

"By the skin of his teeth. Not Chalfont. A guy in the next room and a couple getting off the elevator heard a female voice trained to carry to the back of the house—"

"I simply *adore* Helen Morell's voice," Sylvie said.

"She bellowed, 'Your *secretary?* Don't you have any more imagination than that? You're a fornicating cliche.' It's all here in the *News.*"

"One more high-profile marriage bites the dust," Sylvie said. "Hollywood glamour and Washington savvy. We won't have to hear the word 'synergy' for a while, thank God."

"It worked for nearly ten years," Farber said. "They made a hell of a couple."

The end of the Chalfont marriage was not the half of it. Mark Chalfont, a Senate powerhouse who had been a shoo-in for a fourth term, suffered a crushing defeat and dropped down a memory hole. Helen Morell, who was forty at the time but still had a couple of starring movie roles in her, somehow didn't get them. On sober reflection, the film community had decided that her airing of the family dirty laundry was bad form. She returned to New York and her first love, the theater, where she performed in two off-Broadway plays that closed almost before they opened. "I have no regrets," she told interviewers. "I would do what I did all over

again. Mark Chalfont and I had a deal. It included marital fidelity. A deal is a deal."

That was then, this was now, Farber noted. As of this morning, almost three years to the day after the scandal at the Imperial Grand, the hotel had made the papers again, and this time even the *Times* carried the story. Mark Chalfont had come out of three years of obscurity in an event that was bad for the I.G. and terminal for ex-Senator Chalfont, who had died, apparently of food poisoning, in one of the hotel's rooms. "I hope this doesn't put any pressure on Jim Gerrity," Farber called out from the breakfast table to his wife, who was at the hall closet putting on her coat. "Jim has a problem with pressure."

"Why should it affect Jim?" Sylvie replied. "Is Security supposed to patrol the hotel kitchen for bacteria?"

"Not officially," Farber said, "but when someone dies in a hotel, all eyes turn first to the house dick."

"What was Chalfont thinking anyway, returning to that hotel? He must have been a glutton for punishment. 'Bye, love." And she was out the door.

At his office in an Upper West Side precinct half an hour later, Detective Lieutenant Farber found a message to call Chief of Detectives Quigley.

"Chief?"

"Yeah, Bernie. I want you to backstop that case at the Imperial Grand."

"Case, Chief? The food poisoning?"

"It's a poisoning, but not a food poisoning. It's a suicide or a homicide. I know this is out of your territory"—Farber supervised all homicides on the Upper West Side—"but it's your kind of case and Jim Gerrity—you remember Jim?—asked if you could help. He doesn't have much confidence in the pair that drew the case on rotation when the precinct thought it was a big nothing."

"Who got it?"

"Abbott and Costello."

Abbott and Costello was the unfortunate appellation laid on a team of reasonably competent detectives named Ted Abendt and Paul Carillo. If each had been teamed with another partner their occasional screw-ups would have gone unnoticed (everyone is entitled to a few mistakes), but as a duo they were subjected to constant negative appraisals.

"Gerrity says he's feeling the pressure," Quigley said. "Did you know he's not good with pressure?"

"It's news to me, Chief."

At the Imperial Grand, a serious hotel built during the expansive 1920s, a uniformed officer stood guard at the door of Room

1440. Jim Gerrity met Farber in the hall. Inside his well-pressed suit he looked wilted. "Bernie, it's good to see you," he exhaled in relief. "Abbot and Costello, thank God, are finished here. They're out chasing down leads." He led Farber into the room. "Nothing's been touched since Carl Perry discovered the body at eight-thirty last night."

"Carl Perry?"

"Chalfont's chief of staff when he was in the Senate. Let me run through this sequentially." He exhaled again. "God, if you don't close this thing fast, this place'll be a YMCA in a month."

The room was a large one—the hotel called it a "Junior Suite"—and it featured a sort of living room area that held an overstuffed couch and a table with two chairs. On one end of the table was an open laptop computer. Beside it lay a thick manuscript. At the other end an open bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket half filled with water. Near it was a single champagne flute, empty.

Gerrity followed Farber's eye to the table. "Correction," he said. "One thing was removed, besides the body. A second champagne flute." He exhaled again, this time noisily. "Bernie, I love this job."

"Jim, relax. Why don't you just—"

"Start at the beginning, right." He took a deep breath. "Chalfont checked in day before yesterday from out West and Perry from Washington, where he's now on staff with some Senate committee. He edited the memoir Chalfont has been writing the past three years, *Looking Back*. That's the manuscript on the table, a good three inches of looking back. The two men were giving it a final read-through, according to Perry, before turning it in to the publisher here tomorrow. They worked on the manuscript all day yesterday and then at seven-thirty last night, again according to Perry, Chalfont asked if he could be excused for an hour, as he was expecting a visitor and would appreciate some privacy."

"A female visitor?"

"Chalfont didn't say. He told Perry to be sure to return at exactly eight-thirty, as that would afford him an excuse to ease his visitor out. Instead of going to his room on the twelfth floor, Perry went down to the Renaissance Bar, off the lobby. According to room-service records Chalfont ordered a bottle of champagne and two glasses at seven thirty-five. That would have been just after Perry left him. When the order was delivered at seven-fifty, Chalfont was alone in the room, although the waiter had the feeling that somebody might have been in the bathroom."

"Did the waiter offer anything to support that feeling?"

"He thought he heard some movement in there but he couldn't be sure."

"That's worth zilch," Farber said. "If you deliver a bottle of champagne and two glasses to a hotel room you *assume* someone else is

on the premises—in this case, given the senator's history, a bimbo in the bathroom. Go on."

"Perry got caught up in a political debate in the bar but he kept checking his watch because it seemed important to Chalfont that he get back on time. He arrived at the room at exactly eight-thirty. When there was no answer to his repeated knocks he got the night maid to open the door."

"She's allowed to do that?"

"She had turned down the bed earlier and she recognized Perry from then and from the night before. Anyway, Chalfont was in the room alone, splayed out across the table, dead."

"So what did the Crime Scene Unit report?"

"This champagne glass was empty and it was wiped clean of prints. The other glass went down to the lab. It was half full of champagne and loaded with poison. The champagne in the bottle is clean."

"What was the poison?"

"A variation of a salt the lab told Carillo is used largely in photography."

"Cyanide of potassium?" Farber asked, incredulous. "That's a grisly death. And nobody's going to mistake it for food poisoning."

"Yeah, the food poisoning story was my idea," Gerrity admitted, his slate-gray face taking on a touch of color. "I thought it would keep the scandal down until we wrapped this up."

"It wasn't such a good idea, was it?"

"Not really." He was shrinking deeper into his suit. "Room-service calls dropped to zero."

Farber saved him further embarrassment by shifting focus. "This man Perry. I suppose Carillo and Abendt took a statement?"

"You could call it that."

Carl Perry paced between the bed and the bathroom of his hotel room as though he was measuring it for a distress sale. A compact, sharp-featured man of about forty with rimless glasses and "policy wonk" stamped on his brow, he was at the moment a walking sweat gland, flinging angst in every direction. "That man was a god to me," he declaimed, "a living god. I was a Senate page when he took me under his wing. He taught me everything I know about the environment, about Latin America, about oil, about—yes, about politics. He loved the public arena, he loved fighting the good fight, he was humble about the applause he received and that he richly deserved." He stopped pacing to face Farber. "He was a man of accomplishments, do you understand? He got things done. And to go like this . . . This horrible death . . ." He shuddered. "Could I have saved him? Am I partly to blame?"

"How could you have saved him?" Farber asked. He had chosen

to be alone with Perry. Gerrity had gone off in fear and trembling to report to his boss on the progress of the investigation.

"Suppose I hadn't taken the Senator so literally and I'd returned to his room a few minutes earlier?" Perry said. "Was Mark killed in those few minutes? Could I have prevented his murder?"

"We don't know yet that it was murder," Farber said. "Have you considered that the Senator might have committed suicide? You indicate that politics was his life, and politics was through with him. He had finished writing his testament to his life and work. Maybe he decided this was a good time to bow out."

"Impossible. He never gave a hint of anything like that. Why, I heard him on the phone yesterday afternoon with his brother. They made plans to go to a basketball game this weekend to celebrate the completion of the book. I heard him make his plane reservation, heard him ask for a particular seat reservation. He liked the first row on the left side of the plane, the window seat. Suicide? I don't see it."

"Okay. Have you any idea who might want to kill him?"

"When he was in the Senate, there's plenty would have kicked up their heels if he turned up dead—corporate polluters of one kind or another, destroyers of the environment. He was their big bellyache. Today? He was no longer a threat to anybody. Truth is, to know Mark Chalfont was to love him. He was a saint." A thought struck him. "Let me tell you how much of a saint. The bitch?" His voice jammed up in his throat. "The bitch he was married to?" He tried but was unable to get her name out.

"Helen Morell?"

"Read the book. The last chapter. The woman who destroyed his life? He *forgave* her. It's all there, beautifully written. Talk about compassion! In the end he realized she had been right. 'A deal is a deal,' she said, and he had broken the deal. He wrote that he lost the most precious thing in his life. Can you believe it? I fought with him over that chapter. It made him look soft. It's the one chapter we fought over like tigers. In the end you know what he told me?" Slightly unhinged by his grief, he was waiting for an answer.

"No," Farber said dutifully. "What did he tell you?"

"This is unbelievable, but the man was a saint. He had put her back in his *will*. He was leaving the bulk of his estate to her. To that bitch. He said she was the best thing that had ever happened to him and she deserved whatever he could give her. She was nearly twenty years younger than him and if each of them passed on at eighty she would have nearly twenty years to live in comfort."

"Did she really need his estate?"

"Well . . ." And now for the first time Perry lowered his voice.

"Mark had made some fiduciary decisions for his wife that, despite the best of intentions, didn't mature as he had projected."

"You mean he lost her money. So leaving her well-fixed was an honorable choice. Anyway, he had no children." Fishing now, "Where else might he have left his money?"

"There were people, several people, who were loyal, who stuck with him through the scandal, the bad times." He caught the intensity in his voice and backed off from it judiciously. "And then, of course, there is the Sierra Club and so forth, other environmental groups. Worthy causes."

But by now Farber wasn't listening. Was Helen Morell in town?

Abendt and Carillo hadn't been idle. In pursuit of the identity of Mark Chalfont's visitor last night they had assembled from taxi-fleet trip sheets a list of thirty-two fares dropped at the Imperial Grand between 7:30 and 8:00 P.M. last night. With help from another team of detectives at their precinct they had quickly ruled out seventeen of these after talking to the drivers, because the fares were accompanied by luggage and were obviously checking in. Many of the other fares were in formal attire, headed for a dinner in the ballroom. Farber scanned the short list that remained, picked out the likeliest possibility, and caught the driver on his lunch break at a diner on Tenth Avenue favored by taxi drivers. Surrounded by Sikhs, Haitians, and Egyptians, he was one of the last of a noble breed—the authentic native New York cab driver, sallow, bent, and wary.

After identifying himself Farber said, "You took a fare from Chelsea Rehearsal Halls in the west Twenties to the Imperial Grand last night."

"Hey, I look in the backseat after I drop a fare. Every time. I didn't find no wallet last night, I didn't find no Strady-varius, I didn't find no shoebox full of drug money, I should be so lucky. Okay?"

"The sooner you answer the questions, Sam, the sooner you get back to your hamburger."

Dismally, "Turkeyburger. They cut me off red meat. Yeah, I dropped a broad at the I.G. So what?"

"One passenger? Female? Can you describe her?"

"No."

"Come on. Tall, short, fat?"

"She was some kind of celebrity."

"How do you know?"

"People don't want you to recognize them, they wear sunglasses. At night. Big ones. Another giveaway? A hat with a brim like a dinner plate that's pulled low on the face. Give me a break."

"Her voice?"

"Strong. That was some voice."

"Thanks, Sam. Enjoy your lunch."

"Yeah, sure. It'll lay in my stomach like a beachball."

Chelsea Rehearsal Halls on Eighth Avenue listed four rehearsals in progress on a chalkboard. Three were dance companies, the fourth a play, *A Choice Too Soon,* Studio C.

Farber opened the door of Studio C a bit wider than he had intended, to allow entry to his growing pot. Three actors, all men, were moving and speaking inside an area marked off by floor tape. Another, older, with quivering jowls, looked up from his script and barked, "This is a closed rehearsal, sir. Out, please."

"I'm looking for Helen Morell."

"I said, 'Out.'" He was used to unquestioning obedience.

One of the actors spoke up. "She's in the lounge. Behind the lobby." This was clearly an act of defiance by a man who was sick of being bullied. Farber nodded his thanks and withdrew.

The lounge boasted a coffee machine and a couple of sway-backed couches. Helen Morell sat on one of these holding a paper cup of coffee and staring vacantly into space, her script open in her lap, her long legs curled under her. She was the room's sole occupant and in the soft backlight from the single shaded window behind her she could have been the Helen Morell Farber remembered from old films Sylvie had made him watch on television. When he drew close, the magic faded, but she was still pretty enough to draw glances. The signature lips were as handsomely sculptured as ever in the perfect oval face, and when she broke her trance to look inquiringly at Farber her dark eyes were intense and magnetic.

"Detective Lieutenant Farber," he said, holding out his ID. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

After a bare half-beat of hesitation she said, "Yes, of course." She closed her script and gestured for him to sit beside her. "They don't need me upstairs until three."

"But you'd better not be late."

She smiled and it was her signature smile. "I see you've met our director." The smile vanished. "I suppose this is about Mark Chalfont."

"If you don't mind. I'm looking into his death."

"Of course. I've thought of nothing else since I saw the paper this morning. Poor Mark. I hadn't seen him in three years, or really very much thought about him for the past two."

"Until . . . ?"

"Until his picture jumped out at me from the *Post*'s front page. And then our years together came back in a rush. What a sad ending to a life of accomplishment."

"As I recall, that's not the way you would have summed him up when you filed for divorce."

She winced in remembrance. "I went overboard. Looking back, I could have ended the marriage without ending Mark's useful career."

"How did you know he was at the Imperial Grand?" Farber waited for a reaction but Morell didn't move a muscle. She was good. He was forced to continue, "With that woman from his staff?"

"How do you think? I got an anonymous phone tip."

"From one of your husband's political enemies?"

"I learned that later. Some timber giant had paid to have him followed. Can you imagine?" The signature voice faltered. "I was played for a patsy."

"Until then, all had been well between you and your husband?"

"It wasn't an ideal marriage—we each had our faults—but he was a lot better than my first husband. I liked being away from Hollywood—from the claustrophobia of 'the business'—a few months a year. Mark would visit Department of the Interior sites and I would tag along and take a million pictures. We both loved the outdoors, just as we both loved the applause of an adoring public. Isn't politics a form of show business?"

"No question," Farber said, and then, casually, "You're a serious photographer?"

"It's my passion. Every budding actor finds something to occupy him between auditions and callbacks. I found photography."

"You have a darkroom?"

"You're not really a photographer if you don't do your own lab work. Lieutenant,"—she leaned forward and her dark eyes fixed him—"is any of this of use in your investigation?"

"I never know till afterwards what's been of use in an investigation." He took a beat. "Ms. Morell, I haven't played exactly fair with you. I meant to tell you this right off, but somehow we got off on another foot."

"Yes?" It was a bare whisper.

"A taxi driver has identified you as the person he dropped at the Imperial Grand within half an hour of the time we estimate Mark Chalfont died of a poison that works almost instantly."

"Oh, Lord," she murmured. She tucked her legs up tighter under her. Her previously impassive face took on a look of fear and she crossed her arms defensively against her chest.

"Would you care to tell me what you were doing at the hotel at that hour?"

For a long moment she said nothing while she wrestled to organize her thoughts. Then, her voice tight with anxiety, she said, "Yes, I went there. To see Mark. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Not absolutely. And you almost persuaded me otherwise."

"If you want bread, go to a baker," she said grimly. "If you want acting, go to an actor."

"You went to Mark Chalfont's room. At around eight P.M.?"

"Yes."

"And had a glass of champagne with him?"

"Yes." She was now under steely control.

"And wiped your fingerprints from the glass?"

"Yes, I did that."

"Very thoroughly."

"I'm something of an expert. The scene in *Dark Innocence* in which I wipe my prints from a glass required sixteen takes."

"Do you want to tell me about that visit to Mark from the beginning?"

"Why should I? You wouldn't believe a word I say."

"Because you're an actor?"

"That's the least of it."

"Why don't you try me?"

"As you wish." She sighed a deep sigh of resignation—either because Farber was not going to believe her true story or because of the difficulty of constructing a credible lie.

"Take your time," he said.

She turned to face him more directly, drew herself up straight, and began speaking in a matter-of-fact voice. She seemed determined to avoid histrionics. "Mark phoned me about two weeks ago. I was surprised to hear his voice after all this time. The first thing he said was, 'Don't hang up on me.' I had no intention of doing that. As I told you, my anger towards him had long ago faded. He said he was going to be in New York to see his publisher and could we get together for a drink."

"Did he say why?"

"No, and I didn't ask. I assumed he hoped to bring us back to a level of civility the memory of our good years together deserved. When I agreed to the time and place—he said, absolutely deadpan, 'I believe you know the Imperial Grand'—he suggested that for both our sakes I try to keep a low profile, to avoid the gossipmongers."

"Dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat?"

"And a wraparound scarf." She grimaced. "Apparently they didn't do the job. Anyway, it must have been about eight when I got to his room. He looked terrible—older and sort of dried up—but he behaved like the old Mark, gracious, charming, smooth. We reminisced for a few minutes and it went very well. The years fell away. We drank some champagne and he toasted my engagement. I'm going to be married next month."

"Best wishes."

"Thank you. I don't know, I may be asking for trouble. He's

younger. And has no prospects. Anyway, Mark's face suddenly grew dark and his voice went flat. He said, 'Now let me tell you why I asked you here.' And he did. It was hideous."

She took a deep breath before she went on. "He said his life had been about politics since the day he graduated from law school—campaigning to win elections and then fighting the good fight when he had won them. The respect and the adulation that went with all that were his gin and vermouth, the very air he breathed. I knew all that, he said, yet I deliberately set out to destroy his good name, in effect to destroy his life. And now he was going to destroy mine. Oh yes, he was melodramatic; Mark knew how to hold an audience. He had been doing it since he was twenty-one.

"He said the manuscript on the table summed up his life and everything he stood for. It was his legacy to his constituency, the Americans who vote and those who don't. With the book finished there was no real purpose in going on. This was the perfect time to make his exit. But he would die a martyr, he said, killed by the woman who had destroyed his career. Of course, the actual deed he would perform himself, but that was a technicality. He had arranged for me to have the motive, the means, and the opportunity to kill him, and the blame for his death would without doubt be laid on me. He hoped I would enjoy my added few minutes in the spotlight.

"At this point he glanced at his watch. 'Eight twenty-four,' he said. 'I'm going to do the dirty in three minutes. It will be messy, and if you don't want to watch I suggest you leave right now.' He seemed almost gleeful."

Morell stopped to study Farber's face for a clue to how he was receiving her story. He wore the sympathetic look policemen assume when they are drawing out a witness. It told her nothing. He said only, "Yes, go on."

She picked up the narrative. "I didn't know whether this was a cruel joke of Mark's or he had gone round the bend. My heart was pounding and I took no chances. I scrambled to wipe my prints from the glass, from the chair, from the doorknob. Mark's eyes were on me but he wasn't there. He had retreated to some unreachable place deep within himself. I ran from the room, took the elevator to the lobby, fled the hotel, and walked the thirty blocks to my apartment. I shook all the way home."

She had finished her story. She looked to Farber, her face a question. When he didn't speak, she said, "That's all of it. Listening to myself, it sounds too bizarre to be the truth. But it is. Do you believe me?"

He said, "As I recall, *Dark Innocence* had an even less believable plot. But then, *Dark Innocence* was fiction."

More insistently she said, "Do you believe me?"

"You're very persuasive, Ms. Morell. Tell it just that way to Detectives Ab—Detectives Carillo and Abendt when they come round. And if I were you, I'd also talk to a lawyer."

"Then you don't believe me. You think I'm an actor reading lines."

"Actors aren't always on." He looked at his watch. "It's three o'clock. Your director's going to have a fit."

She scrambled to her feet and he watched her leave the room. If she was acting, she was good. And then he remembered *Dark Innocence* and *The Penitent.* She *was* good.

"How does she look?" Sylvie asked eagerly. Her husband had recounted Helen Morell's story as he mixed them each a pre-dinner martini.

"Don't you want to know if she did it?"

"First things first."

"She looks good for her age," Bernie said. "I mean, she must be pushing forty."

"She's forty-three."

"How do you know?"

"Women know these things. So she looks forty?"

Farber had to be careful. Sylvie was forty-five. "I said forty because she looks a little older than you and you look about thirty-five. Do you want to hear about the case or not?"

Reassured, Sylvie said, "Of course I do. And of course she didn't kill him. Her story is completely believable." She read something in her husband's face as she studied it over the rim of her glass. "Isn't it?"

"Not entirely."

"Oh God, don't tell me." Then, "Tell me."

"If Chalfont killed himself, he had to have brought the poison with him to the hotel and poured it into the champagne glass."

"So?"

"Where's the container—the vial, the envelope, whatever had held the soluble cyanide? It wasn't found on the body or in the room, and believe me, the room was stripped to the wallpaper this afternoon. There wasn't enough time in the three to five minutes between Helen Morell's leaving and Carl Perry's expected arrival at the room for Chalfont to have taken it out of the building. He couldn't even count on getting up and down in the elevator in that time. The likeliest explanation is that Helen Morell brought the poison with her, poured some in Chalfont's glass when he was in the bathroom or on the phone, and then took the container with her when she left."

"He could have thrown it out the window," Sylvie urged. "Or, wait a second. That man Carl Perry, who discovered the body—

suppose *he* took it away with him? To cover the fact that his boss had killed himself."

"Sylvie, what's happened to your usual evenhanded assessment of my work? What's making you root so hard for Morell?"

"You know how fond I am of her, particularly of her straight-from-the-shoulder honesty on-screen. I'd hate to have her turn out to be a liar, and a murdering one at that."

"Regrettably, love, the hotel windows don't open. And the maid who unlocked the door for Perry says he never entered the room. He stood in the doorway with his knees knocking while she checked the body for signs of life."

"What about the toilet?" Sylvie was almost pleading now. "That's the first thing I'd think of if I were Chalfont preparing to kill myself. Pour the poison into the glass, then flush the envelope, the vial, whatever, down the toilet."

"Suppose it doesn't go down? Have you ever tried to flush a small tube or a torn-up envelope? They don't always go down. They didn't this afternoon when we tested the Imperial Grand's eighty-year-old plumbing. If your poison container doesn't flush, there goes the careful plan you've been working on for God knows how long to frame your ex-wife. Can you take that chance?"

Sylvie's eyes flashed anger. "So you're saying that Helen Morell poisoned Chalfont and beat it out of there with the remains of the poison."

"I'm not saying it, logic is. Yes, there's a slim chance the poison went down the toilet and Chalfont committed suicide. More likely, Morell poisoned Chalfont's glass, hastily hid the rest of the poison in her handbag, and dumped it in a street trash receptacle on her way home. Then she made up that ingenious story that lets her off the hook. If we believe it."

"This is dreadful. If Morell is innocent, how will she ever prove it?" Agitated, she bolted what was left of her martini.

Farber was ready to bring the discussion to a close. He was hungry. Reluctantly he said, "So far as I can see, she has one chance to establish her innocence." He went to the table in the tiny dining room. "And it's a real long shot, totally off the wall."

Sylvie pursued him to the table, waiting for more. When it didn't come, she snapped, "For heaven's sake, Bernie, what is it? What is this off-the-wall long shot?"

"I'll tell you when I have an answer, up or down. I won't know for a couple of days."

"A couple of days? *A couple of days?* You are the most exasperating—" And then, crisply, "Let's eat this chicken."

The next day and a half were mildly chilly in the Farber household. The two mornings passed in near silence. Bernie read the

Times at breakfast and wisely ceded the *News* to Sylvie. Paperwork kept Bernie at the office late the first evening and he phoned home to say he'd "grab a bite" at a diner. By the time he got home, he was relieved to find Sylvie drifting off to sleep.

The next night he came home earlier than usual and Sylvie guessed from his cat-that-swallowed-the-canary face that something was up. He greeted her with a warm kiss but he made no announcements. She was damned if she would beg. She would wait him out.

Finally he was obliged to say it. "We closed the Chalfont case."

With admirable reserve she said, "When did that happen?"

"An hour ago. He committed suicide."

Sylvie's face broke into a wide and generous grin. "I knew it! I just knew it! You're sure?"

"Absolutely. He sent a letter to his brother out West."

"Confessing his plot against Helen Morell?"

"No. It was a short note attached to a check for some basketball tickets. The stationery was from Chalfont's law office." Sylvie stared at him, wordless and puzzled, and he went on. "The envelope contained trace evidence of cyanide. Chalfont had obviously prepared the note and the poison-filled envelope before he left home. After he poured the contents into his champagne glass, he sealed and mailed the letter. Presto, no evidence that he killed himself."

"Wait a second. He was expecting Carl Perry in a couple of minutes. He didn't have time to mail a letter."

"Yes, he did. Remember how you wondered why he went back to the Imperial Grand, the scene of his Waterloo three years ago? I walked by the reason half a dozen times before it registered."

Patiently, "Bernie, before what registered?"

"What's between the elevators in the Imperial Grand?"

"Is this another quiz? I've never been in the Imperial Grand." She ventured a guess. "The call buttons?"

"And the *mail chute.* Twenty steps from Chalfont's door. Thirty seconds to mail the letter and he's back in his room in time to kill himself before Perry's scheduled arrival. The stuff he used does the job in seconds."

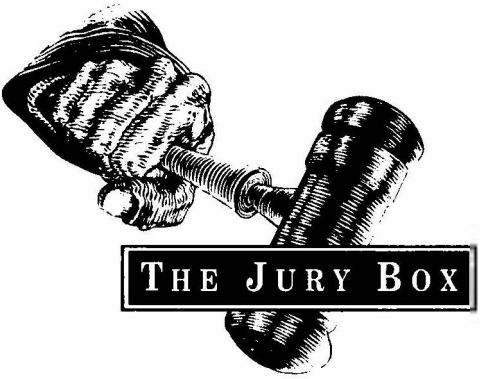
"My God." Sylvie's jaw hung slack in awe. "My God, the planning that took. What that man must have felt about Morell."

"Never underestimate the power of hate."

Disgust welled up in Sylvie. To fight a rising nausea she chose to change the subject.

"What's with Jim Gerrity in all this? How does he come out?"

"When there's a murder in a hotel it's the house dick's fault. But a suicide in the privacy of a room? You can't blame anyone for that. Jim says the pressure is definitely off." ●



by Jon L. Breen

Ross Macdonald's *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* (1962), one of the finest detective novels ever written, is well served by an audio version (Audio Partners, $29.95) that combines the best features of an unabridged reading (every word the author wrote) and a dramatization (great characterizations by professional actors). Harris Yulin reads Lew Archer's narration and dialogue in superb fashion and is supported by a cast including Edward Asner, Jennifer Tilly, Tyne Daly, Shirley Knight, Mitchell Ryan, and over thirty others. The elements that make Macdonald so extraordinary are his characters, his prose, his themes of search and loss, and his surprising yet credible plot edifices. For all the artifice of the mystery puzzle, Archer is a more realistic private eye than most: When he has evidence related to a murder, he immediately makes a full report to the police; he is concerned about getting paid by someone when his initial client appears ready to fire him; and he asks for money back from an informant to assure he can testify later that no one paid him for his evidence. Although there are a few very brief interludes of violence, the emphasis is more on the mental and emotional than the physical aspects of detection.

**** Michael Dibdin: *And Then You Die,* Pantheon, $21. Someone is trying to kill Italian cop Aurelio Zen before he can testify against members of the Mafia. If you have to assign to a subgenre this intelligent, sophisticated, funny, romantic, and genuinely suspenseful novel, pure thriller comes the closest. A quoted review from Britain's *New Statesman* evokes Agatha Christie, Elmore Leonard, and Ian Fleming—justified comparisons but all off the mark in pigeonholing one of crime fiction's most original writers. Watch how Dibdin teases the reader in the closing pages: Is he or isn't he going to resort to

a time-honored surprise twist?

**** Peter Lovesey: *The Sedgemoor Strangler and Other Stories of Crime,* Crippen & Landru, $17 trade paper, $42 limited hardcover. Sixteen stories, a couple from *EQMM,* most from original anthologies, present a variety of styles, moods, and backgrounds from an always reliable entertainer. Among the highlights, the title story demonstrates how fully plotted and deceptive a whodunit can be accomplished in the short-story format, while "The Four Wise Men" is about as funny as a Sherlock Holmes pastiche can get without crossing the line into parody.

*** Peter Lovesey: *Diamond Dust,* Soho, $23. The Peter Diamond series takes a somber turn when the Bath police detective, himself an inevitable suspect, unofficially investigates the murder of his wife. Even readers who anticipate part of the finishing surprise will appreciate the author's puzzle-spinning, humanity, and sheer readability.

*** James Lee Burke: *Jolie Blon's Bounce,* Simon & Schuster, $25. Louisiana cop Dave Robicheaux investigates the murder of a teenage girl and confronts a nemesis from his childhood, an embodiment of evil whose name is Legion. As usual, I'm ambivalent. Burke's descriptive powers are extraordinary; some of the incidentals (scenes in a jail holding tank and at two contrasting AA meetings, a reflection on the ironies of capital punishment) have immense power. But the tough-guy confrontations, physical and verbal, become tiresome, and the climactic rescue seems too contrived in a novel with such serious literary pretensions. (It's also available in an effective audio abridgment [$26], masterfully read by Will Patton with an introduction by the author.)

*** Anne Perry: *Death of a Stranger,* Ballantine, $25.95. In London of the 1860s, Hester Latterly is running a clinic for abused prostitutes; husband William Monk struggles with his lost memories while investigating skullduggery in the railroad and banking business. With a surprising solution and an exciting action finale, this marks a return to near-top-form (everywhere but in the courtroom) for a recently sagging series.

*** Kate Sedley: *The Saint John's Fern,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Fifteenth-century sleuth Roger the Chapman, an itinerant peddler and sort of private eye for God, investigates a rich man's murder and the disappearance of the nephew believed to have killed him. In medieval superstition, the plant of the title was believed to effect invisibility. This is a fine job, both in historical details and fairly clued puzzle.

*** Dana Stabenow: *A Fine and Bitter Snow,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. In the latest well-written case for Alaska private eye Kate Shugak, Stabenow skillfully delivers some typical features of the contemporary

mystery: extensive (and fascinating) regional detail, a large cast of continuing characters, an animal companion for the sleuth, physical and emotional traumas that would stop a lesser woman in her snowshoes, and a thinnish mystery plot secondary to romantic, social, and political issues—plus our old friend, the crazed Vietnam veteran.

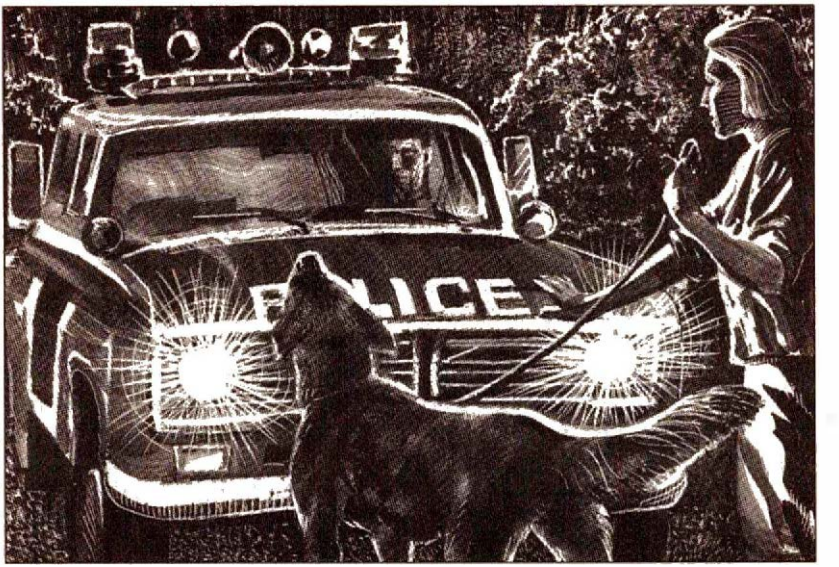
*** Charles B. Child: *The Sleuth of Baghdad,* Crippen & Landru, $27 hardcover, $17 trade paper. The third in the publisher's Lost Classics series may be the best yet, as Iraqi Inspector Chafik J. Chafik, a favorite sleuth of the forties and fifties in *Collier's* and *EQMM,* is collected for the first time with 15 of his best cases. Chafik may remind readers of Charlie Chan (the picturesque language and wise sayings) or Inspector Ghote (the family relationships). Like those two, he is not an "exotic" stereotype but a complex, fully realized character, and his cases have admirably tricky plotting to go with the local color.

*** Robert Colby: *The Last Witness and Other Stories,* Five Star, $24.95. The title story and three others are drawn from *AHMM* of the 60s and 70s, but a strong 1959 novel, *The Deadly Desire,* representative of the famous Gold Medal line of paperback originals, comprises half the book. The background is Southern California, the style hard-driving pulp with occasional poetic flourishes, the themes revenge and sexual obsession.

** Judith Post: *Twisted in the Dark: Four Short Mysteries,* Wormhole Books, $13. Four previously unpublished stories in this 50-page chapbook by an *EQMM* and *AHMM* contributor have a common theme of alcohol abuse. If not completely successful, they're well worth reading, and Joanna Erbach's illustrations are a plus. (The publisher offers several other signed limited-edition chapbooks in the horror and dark suspense vein, including one by Edward Bryant, who contributes an introduction to Post's collection.)

The ubiquitous Otto Penzler and Thomas H. Cook have co-edited the first of a projected annual anthology series devoted to true crime. The pieces I sampled from *The Best American Crime Reporting: 2002* (Pantheon, $29.50; Vintage trade paper $15) suggest high quality in writing and reportage: Pat Jordan's deceptively artless *New Yorker* piece on O.J. Simpson, in which the acquitted double murderer is allowed to indict himself in his own words, and Skip Hollandsworth's article from *Texas Weekly* on the probable murder of the great racehorse and stallion Alydar.

Fans of Ellery Queen, author and character, should know that Robert E. Washer, who edited *The Ellery Queen Review,* a splendid fanzine of the early 1970s, has established a new Web site devoted to the life and works of EQ. The address: hometown.aol.com/washern-deq/default.html.



Art by Allen Davis

The Dog That Didn't Bark

by Margaret Maron

"Feel like another round?" Donna asked as she and her husband neared the lane that wound through a stand of tall and bushy cedar trees and led to their back terrace.

Their lot here in central North Carolina was less than five acres, but she had mowed a long path through the property, a sort of lazy-eight shape that meandered through woods and field. It was more than wide enough for two people to walk side by side. Three times around was exactly one mile, and walking that mile with two-pound wrist and ankle weights was usually all that James felt like doing now that he was retired—especially in this muggy August weather to which his northern-bred body stubbornly refused to adapt.

"No, I think I'll go on in and make our drinks." Their regular evening walks were for physical health. Their regular evening

cocktails maintained their mental health. "You go ahead, though, if you like."

"Maybe I'll just zip around one more time," said Donna, who had barely broken a sweat. There was a radiance about her lately, as if she'd discovered the fountain of youth since their move from northern Pennsylvania.

The setting sun cast long shadows around them.

"If you don't come back soon, I'll send the dogs."

She laughed. "I'm almost tempted to stay out till you do. Just to see what kind of dogs you'd send."

"Maron is one of the most seamless Southern authors since Margaret Mitchell," said *PW* in a review of the new Maron novel *Slow Dollar*. The North Carolina native began her fiction-writing career with short stories, the form she considers most natural to her, but she has earned great recognition, too, for her twenty published novels. Her works have been translated into seven languages and are on the reading lists of various college courses.

"What did she mean by that?" asked Major Dwight Bryant of the Colleton County Sheriff's Department.

"It was a joke," said Greggson. "You know—like, send the Marines? I don't care much for dogs and we've never had any, although she thinks we really ought to now that we're living in the country."

Country was a relative term, thought Dwight. The lots might be big out here, with tall leafy oaks and maples spreading deep shade around the houses and natural tangles of kudzu, honeysuckle, and cedars left along the road fronts to maintain the illusion, but they were still lots, not unbroken countryside.

"And you say that was about seven-thirty?"

It was now almost midnight, more than four hours since Donna Greggson disappeared. Normally they would have waited twenty-four hours before searching for an adult, but it was a slow evening and Dwight had been nearby when the call came in that a woman was missing—a beautiful woman somewhat younger than her husband, judging by the snapshots he'd seen. She had wide brown eyes, soft brown hair, and a teasing smile. At the moment, there were no smiles here in the Greggson living room, only anxious concern as her husband and their three nearest neighbors answered his questions.

Once, thought Dwight, he would have known all the faces living in this end of the county by sight if not by name. But there had been so much development over here in the last few years that the people in this room were total strangers to him.

He had learned that Mr. and Mrs. Zukowski were neighbors to the east and that Walter Malindorf's property touched both pieces at the rear. Like James Greggson, the other three looked to be in their mid to late fifties. Mrs. Zukowski—Marita—was tall and lean, with a strong-willed chin and the sturdy air of an outdoors person. Her husband Hank was lanky and thin-faced under a thick crop of rusty brown hair. He had the kind of boyish good looks that ages well. Time would be kinder to him than to his wife, thought Dwight.

Malindorf, on the other hand, reminded him of a bantam rooster, loud and puffed with the self-importance that came from owning the largest "farmette" in this upscale development. Texans had a phrase for people who bought a sliver of earth and acted as if they held title to a kingdom, thought Dwight: All hat, no cattle. In Walter Malindorf's case, it was all car, no crops. Shorter than the others by five or six inches and chubby where they were slim and fit, the man owned one of those outsized all-terrain SUVs. When Greggson called to ask if his wife was there, Malindorf had immediately come roaring through the wide-mowed paths, shining his four headlights and side-mounted spotlight deep into the woods and across the open meadow, effectively destroying any physical traces that might have helped them determine what happened to the missing woman.

"Now you see here, Bryant," Malindorf blustered, his round face flushed with annoyance. "If she'd been lying out there hurt, you'd have been glad enough to have me find her pretty quick."

"But you didn't, did you?" said Hank Zukowski. "And now you've messed it up good for them."

Malindorf's red face turned even redder and he glared at his neighbor, rising on the balls of his feet to get closer to Zukowski's face. "Yeah, and if you'd kept your eyes open when you walked over, maybe you'd have seen who was sneaking around the place. *If* there was anybody to see."

"It's too early to say who should've done what," Dwight said, holding up a placating hand as he turned to Greggson. "Was there anything out of the ordinary about your routine today? Any visitors, unusual phone calls?"

"Nothing," James Greggson said firmly. "We worked on the yard this morning. It was getting so hard to mow under some of the trees that I cut a lot of lower limbs. Donna hates the sound of the chainsaw so she went inside for that. We drove over to the clubhouse for lunch, then trimmed up some bushes this afternoon. No phone calls that she mentioned. The cleaning woman came yesterday, so there was no one else here today unless you count the Mexican that comes in every week. He mowed the lawn, finished up

the pruning, and hauled all the limbs down to the bonfire, but I don't think Donna said five words to him the whole time."

"Bonfire?"

"Yeah. We're planning a big Halloween party and we've been piling up all our burnable stuff on it for the last six months. Zukowski and Malindorf, too. It's going to be huge."

Dwight wondered if they planned to get a burn permit or if they knew how quickly bonfires could get out of hand with just the least little breeze. Well, one thing about these big lots, a fire truck could get here before a carelessly set fire burned more than three or four of their own acres.

"What's the worker's name?"

"Rosie's all I know. I always pay him cash, so I've never needed his last name."

"Rosario Fuentes," said Marita Zukowski helpfully. "He mucks out the stable for me. Lives in Cotton Grove."

Dwight made a note of the name. "Was he still here when you went for your evening walk?"

Greggson shook his head. "Left at five sharp. Said his kid was pitching in a Little League game. I remember when my sons were in Little League," he added, his voice suddenly wistful. "I never missed a game. It's great the way people assimilate, isn't it? Man can hardly speak English and his son'll be American as apple pie."

He gave a rueful smile. "Or should I say American as tacos and enchiladas?" From the woods out back came the sharp bark of a dog. Dwight stepped to the heavy French doors and opened them. Even at midnight, the air outside was still hot and muggy. No breath of wind stirred. He stepped out onto the broad, multilevel cedar deck and the others followed.

"They find her?" asked Malindorf, almost shoving Dwight aside.

Flashlights bobbled toward them through the trees and several officers walked into the light cast by lanterns on the deck railings.

"No luck, Major," one of them called. "The dog's just going around in circles. If she left the path, she wasn't walking. We stayed to the edge as much as we could, but all them tire tracks—" There was the suggestion of a shrug in the officer's voice. "Maybe in the daylight we'll be able to see something."

"That's it?" asked Greggson.

Malindorf's face began to redden again. "You're quitting? Just like that?"

"If the dog couldn't find her, there's nothing more we can do out there tonight," said Dwight. "We'll be back by sunrise, though. I'll post an officer and I don't want anybody else crossing the area till we can take another look at it in the daylight."

Greggson turned to Hank Zukowski. "You *sure* you didn't see

her, Hank? The way she was headed was over toward your side of the property."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zukowski asked mildly, a frown wrinkling his youthful brow. "I've told you no a dozen times tonight."

Greggson gave an impatient flip of his hand and turned away, but the taller Zukowski grabbed his shoulder.

"No! First Malindorf here and now you. If I'd seen Donna, don't you think I'd tell you?"

"Unless—?" said Malindorf, deliberately leaving the word to dangle accusingly.

"Unless what? Christ! You think I had anything to do with her disappearance? I was with James here. You said it yourself, James. I got here about five minutes after you left her and I haven't been out of your sight since then. When the hell did I have time to do whatever you're thinking?"

Dwight watched the distrait husband shake his head in weary frustration.

"Sorry, Hank. I don't know what I think. I just want her to come home."

Marita Zukowski glared at the other two men and put out a comforting hand to lead Greggson back inside the house. Dwight followed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Greggson, but I have to ask you. Is there any reason your wife would leave on her own? Any trouble here that maybe made her want to get away for a while?"

"Of course not!" Greggson's steel-gray hair had begun to thin across the top, but his voice was still as youthful and vigorous as his handsome face.

"Then why did you wait so long to start calling your neighbors?"

"I told you. I thought she was playing with me. About sending dogs. Hank and I were here talking about the book he brought back, not paying attention to the time. I just assumed she was over with Marita. That's why I walked home with Hank—so she wouldn't have to come back in the dark alone. Then Marita said she hadn't been there, and that's when I called Walter. They're the only people out here we know well enough for Donna to drop in on."

Dwight's people had already searched the house from attic to basement, paying special attention to the auxiliary freezer in the basement and to the trunks and boxes in the attic. James Greggson might indeed be a loving and worried husband, but every officer was experienced enough to know that when a spouse goes missing, the remaining spouse is often responsible. So they looked very carefully at every container and cubbyhole large enough to hold a small woman. They even unrolled the large tent and sleep-

ing bags stored there from the years of wilderness camping with his sons and grandsons.

When they finished with the house, they had moved on to the "barn," a three-car garage with a guest loft above and storage spaces the size of horse stalls to the sides, all under a gambrel roof. Working barns in Colleton County tended to be sided in sheets of tin, but Dwight supposed the dark red paint looked more authentic to somebody from Pennsylvania.

"Her purse is still here," Marita Zukowski said now, pointing to a side table near the door.

The summer bag was a feminine froth of multicolored straw. A tangle of keys lay beside it.

They all watched as James Greggson opened it and pulled out a slim wallet. They saw cash in the bill compartment and credit cards neatly slotted.

"Anything missing?" asked Dwight.

"We only have four cards," he answered, fanning them in his hand. "ATM, telephone, Visa, American Express. They're all here. Her driver's license and medical insurance, too."

"So she *didn't* leave under her own steam," Malindorf said. "I *knew* it! Just because this piddly-assed excuse for a sheriff's department's giving up doesn't mean we have to. Come on, guys, let's get our flashlights and go find her."

Dwight rose to his full six-foot-three, topping Walter Malindorf's take-charge pomposity by a good ten inches. "You go blundering out there again, Mr. Malindorf, and I'll arrest you for trespassing on a crime scene."

"Crime scene?" Hank Zukowski looked shocked.

"Until proven otherwise," Dwight said grimly.

"But she may be hurt," said Greggson. "Bleeding."

"The dog would have found her." He hated having to speak so bluntly, but they'd done enough damage between them and he wasn't going to allow more if he could help it. "We'll get an early start in the morning. Maybe something will give us a clue."

At that, the others rose, too.

Marita Zukowski gave Greggson a neighborly hug as she left. "Try to get some sleep, James. It won't help Donna if you worry yourself into a breakdown."

Dwight heard Malindorf offer the Zukowskis a lift since they couldn't take the shortcut to their house but would have to walk around by the road. As the monstrous SUV roared away down the drive, he paused by a display of photographs atop a console table. Most were of children and young adults. "Your children?"

"Mine, yes," said Greggson. "This is a second marriage for both of us, but Donna never had children."

"Any of them in the area?"

Greggson shook his head. "No. All back in Pennsylvania. Carrie, my baby—" Here he touched the picture of a younger woman holding two little boys. "—her husband was almost transferred to the Research Triangle, but it fell through."

"I'm surprised you could leave them," said Dwight, thinking of his own son up in Virginia, a good four hours away.

"I didn't want to," he admitted. "Not really. But the winters there are hard and Donna's brother's here, so—oh, Lord! I forgot all about Phil. He's in Raleigh. I'd better call him."

When it was clear from the one-sided phone conversation that Greggson's brother-in-law hadn't heard from the missing woman, Dwight let himself out into the warm August night.

He spoke to the officer he'd left on watch, then got in his patrol car.

The mosquitoes were wicked tonight. Even though Marita Zukowski had slipped one of Hank's long-sleeved cotton shirts on over her bare arms, one buzzed around her face and another bit her bare ankle.

Everything that could be said between them had been said by the time they reached their own front door and Hank had gone on up to their bedroom. She told him she was going to walk their dog but that was only an excuse to hurry back down their long drive before that deputy could go away thinking what he must think.

Duncan was as sweet-tempered and patient as most golden retrievers, and he lay quietly at her feet as she waited. She slapped at the buzzing near her ear and wondered if mosquitoes bothered him. In the middle of that thought, the patrol car finally pulled out of the Greggson drive down the road and she stepped from the shadow of the trees so that its headlights washed over her and her dog.

Dwight slowed to a stop and lowered his window. "You wanted to talk to me, Mrs. Zukowski?"

"Yes." Her voice was as tight as the skin stretched across the bones of her face.

He cut his lights, got out of the car, and leaned against it to listen to what this tall, thin woman wanted to say here in the darkness, away from the others.

"James and Walter. They're making it sound as if Hank had something to do with Donna's disappearance."

"Were they?"

"Don't play games, Major. It may suit you to let Walter Malindorf think you're a country bumpkin, but I read that piece in the paper about you a couple of years ago. Ex-Army Intelligence? They

don't take just anybody. You heard what James and Walter were saying, all right."

The moon had long since set, but there was enough starlight for him to see the urgency in her eyes. "So?"

"So, I just want you to know there's nothing to it," she said. "Hank and I had a light supper about six-thirty and he walked over to return a book about an hour later, just as he and James told you. Donna's a flirt and a tease and maybe Hank had his head turned for a minute or two when they first moved here, and maybe he did kiss her a little longer than he should have last New Year's, but you can't blame Hank for that. She's very pretty, you know. Doesn't look a day over forty though I know for a fact that she's fifty-one. Small and cuddly, too," she added bitterly.

Small and cuddly women made some men feel even taller and more manly, thought Dwight. Whereas a wife this tall, this angular—?

"There was absolutely nothing more to it than that," said Mrs. Zukowski, "but when you asked if there'd been any trouble and James said no, I couldn't contradict him right there, could I?"

"They were still fighting over a New Year's Eve kiss? Eight months later?"

"No, no!" she said impatiently. "They fought, but not about Hank. It was about staying here. You see, Donna wheedled James into moving to North Carolina even though he didn't want to leave Pennsylvania. He misses his old friends, his children, going camping with his grandchildren. I think he even misses the snow. The bargain was that he'd give it a try for two years and then they'd move back if he really hated it. She was so sure he'd love it as much as the rest of us do."

"Do you?" He was genuinely curious about the influx of new people, about why they came, and whether they found what they hoped for.

"Oh yes! I've wanted a horse of my own ever since I was a little girl and now I finally have two. That was the big draw for this development. All the boundary lines are bridle paths held in common by the association. We can ride for miles out here. And Hank can golf three hundred days a year if he wants. I can't say I'm crazy about your summer humidity, but it doesn't bother me as much as it bothers James."

"Mr. Greggson doesn't ride or golf?"

"That's not the point," said Marita Zukowski. "Donna made a bargain she had no intention of keeping. It was just a way to get him down here near her precious brother and away from his children. The two years are up at the end of October, but last week, when he told her he wanted to put the house on the market next month, she just laughed at him. Said he hadn't tried to adjust and

that North Carolina was their home from now on. James was furious. Ask Walter. He was there. We could see how angry James was, yet he just turned away and walked into the house and poured us all another round of drinks." She hesitated. "Something else, though."

"Yes?" asked Dwight.

"They've only been married a few years. The Pennsylvania house was his. This house is in both their names and North Carolina's a no-fault state, isn't it? If James left her, he'd have to split his assets and there goes a big chunk of his grandchildren's inheritance."

And what about Mrs. Zukowski? mused Dwight on the drive back to Dobbs. No-fault divorce cuts both ways. Would she have to give up those long-wished-for horses if her husband and her neighbor really were having an affair and it led to two divorces?

Daybreak came way too early next morning, but Dwight Bryant kept his word and was back at the Greggson home before the sun was fully up.

James Greggson met him in the driveway with his brother-in-law Phil Crusher, a compactly built man with the same wide brown eyes as his sister.

"Tell Bryant what you told me," Greggson said when introductions were over.

"C'mon, James. It really doesn't mean what you're thinking," the younger man protested.

"Tell me what, Mr. Crusher?"

"It's just a coincidence," he answered reluctantly. "Last week, when Donna came into town for lunch, we got to talking about some movie she'd watched the night before. I forget the name of it. Something about a man who decided to disappear? How he put together some secret cash, got new identity papers, and just walked away from his old life? She said that it might be fun to try it, except that if she did, the hardest thing would be never again seeing people you did love. Like me. But it was *nothing,* Major Bryant. She was just making conversation."

"You're sure?"

"I was till James here—" His voice wavered with uncertainty. "I thought we were too close for that."

"Then where's her passport?" James demanded.

"What?" said Dwight.

"When Phil told me what she said, I went upstairs and looked in the desk drawer where we keep our passports. Hers is gone. We keep some extra cash on hand, and that's gone, too."

"How much extra cash you talking?" asked Dwight.

"Fifteen hundred, two thousand. It varies. But she could easily

have another twelve or fourteen thousand squirreled away. She isn't extravagant and I don't question what she spends as long as the accounts aren't overdrawn at the end of the month."

Must be nice, thought Dwight, who was paying his son's orthodontia bills in addition to child support and hadn't had an extra hundred since the divorce, much less an extra thousand.

"I hate to be so blunt here, Mr. Greggson, but was your wife maybe seeing somebody else?"

"No!" he said angrily.

"Yes," said his brother-in-law.

Dwight and Greggson both stared at him.

Phil Crusher was clearly embarrassed but determined. "I'm sorry, James, but I think she was."

"Who?" they asked.

"I don't know. She just laughed when I called her on it, but I've seen her like that before. Happy. Excited. Running on adrenaline. Just like the time she started with you."

"I didn't know she was still married then," James said stiffly. "She told me she and her first husband were legally separated."

The brother's assertion opened up other possibilities, but Dwight wasn't going to jump to conclusions. First things first.

Together, he and his team walked every inch of the wide paths, beginning at the huge brush pile in the middle, where the looping paths crossed. It was going to be another hot day. The green leaves on yesterday's freshly-cut tree limbs were already wilted and limp and the sun had begun to bake the open meadow where flowering weeds grew head-high.

Above them, in the hard blue sky, a helicopter sent out from one of the Raleigh news channels made noisy sweeps back and forth over the whole area. The trees were too thick to see beneath, but if Donna Greggson's body was lying in the open, they saw no sign of it.

They fanned out across the property six to eight feet apart.

Not even a stray cigarette butt beneath the trees.

As a last resort, they dismantled the bonfire pile limb by limb, until it became clear that nothing was there except brush, scrap lumber, cardboard, and easily burned bits of household furnishings. Among the castoffs were a perfectly usable oak captain's chair with only one broken rung, a stuffed dog that didn't look as if a child had ever played with it, old magazines that should have been recycled, and some threadbare cotton bath mats.

By this time, pudgy little Walter Malindorf had driven over in his bright red SUV with Hank Zukowski. Both men seemed anxious to help in any way they could and offered to repile the brush. They acted grateful for the work and toiled away under the hot August sun until Malindorf's shirt was wet with sweat and even

Zukowski was breathing hard. Dwight had seen this reaction before. It was the male equivalent of bringing casseroles to a house of bereavement.

Greggson came down for a few minutes, his handsome face haggard and drawn, and he watched Zukowski with suspicious, resentful eyes before abruptly turning away and stalking back to the house.

"What's bugging him?" asked Zukowski uneasily.

Malindorf picked up the stuffed dog, a golden retriever made of silky plush, pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his chino shorts, and wiped sweat that trickled down his round cheeks. "Donna's missing," he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Or didn't you notice?"

Zukowski stared at him, then shrugged and threw a final limb on the pile.

The pile was much taller than Malindorf, but with a sort of solemn dignity he stood on tiptoe to set the little dog as high up as he could, as if to leave it standing guard.

When Dwight asked if his people could search their outbuildings, both men agreed. He really wanted to search the Zukowski home, but without a warrant, he doubted they'd allow it and not even his favorite judge would give him one without probable cause.

Since the Greggsons' path edged the communal bridle path between their property and Malindorf's, and since golf carts and occasional light trucks also used the bridle path as a shortcut to the development's golf course and clubhouse, it was clear that Mrs. Greggson could easily have disappeared by that route, willingly or unwillingly.

"But you'd think the dog would have found her scent," argued one of the deputies.

"Not if she was in somebody's truck," said another.

"Or on a horse," said a third.

As they broke for lunch, Deputy Mayleen Richards arrived with the first results of her electronic inquiries.

"No records of anything more serious than speeding tickets," she reported glumly. "All solid citizens with triple-A credit ratings—the men anyhow. Mrs. Zukowski and Mrs. Greggson haven't held paying jobs since they married."

In her voice was the disdain working women often have for women who don't have to.

"Any dirt from the cleaning woman?"

"Just the usual. If they fought, it wasn't in front of her."

"And Fuentes?" Dwight asked.

Her freckled face brightened. "I checked his alibi myself with my brother's son. Billy Jim's on the same team as the Fuentes boy,

who's got a slider that falls off the edge of the earth according to Billy Jim. Their game started at six-thirty and the boy's daddy was there from the get-go."

If Greggson was correct about the time he last saw his wife, then he and Zukowski alibied each other. Except for their dogs, Malindorf and Marita Zukowski had been alone in their respective houses. Malindorf had no apparent motive, though, and if Marita Zukowski had gotten rid of the woman she feared as a rival then she was a damned good actress with nerves of steel.

By midafternoon, there was nothing left for Dwight Bryant to do except face Donna Greggson's husband and brother and promise that they would continue to canvass the neighborhood and follow up any leads their APBs produced. If she had left of her own volition, then sooner or later they'd probably hear from her.

He let them vent on him the frustration he himself was feeling and promised to keep in touch.

And that's where matters stood through the rest of a torrid August and an unusually hot September. On a drizzly and cooler day near the middle of October, Dwight Bryant got a phone call from James Greggson. Once more he had to tell the man that there was nothing new to report.

"Actually," said Greggson, "I called to tell you that I've sold the house. I'll be moving back to Pennsylvania next week. You have Phil's phone number, and I'll send you my new one as soon as I know it."

Nothing in his tone accused the Colleton County Sheriff's Department of incompetence, but neither did it sound as if he ever expected Dwight to use the new number.

This was not his first unsolved missing person, thought Dwight, and it wouldn't be his last, but he kept feeling that somehow he'd messed up here, that there must have been one more thing that would have made all the difference if he'd only noticed in time.

The drizzle ended in the afternoon and cool westerly winds blew away all the gray clouds, giving a hint of the beautiful autumn weather to come. As Walter Malindorf stepped outside to give his three spaniels a run, the tubby little man smelled something odd. He followed his nose around the corner of his house and saw wisps of smoke lifting above the woods that separated his place from Greggson's. Curious, he opened the back of his SUV, let the dogs pile in, then drove through the woods, across the bridle trail, and onto the wide path Donna had kept mowed until she disappeared.

Tall weeds with small yellow asterlike flowers had grown up in the past two months. Soon, he thought sadly, there would be no sign that a path had ever been here, that a small brown-haired woman with laughing brown eyes had ever passed along it.

As the path curved to the crossing, he saw that a ring of tiny flames edged across the damp grass toward the brush pile in the middle. Greggson had set a backfire to keep the main fire in check when it kindled and was standing alertly with pitchfork and shovel to take care of any stray sparks.

Since Donna's disappearance, relations had been strained between the three neighbors. Malindorf knew that Greggson suspected Zukowski of sleeping with his wife. He also knew that Zukowski denied it. Having no desire to listen to either man's bitterness, Malindorf had avoided them both. He wouldn't even have known that Greggson had sold the place if Marita Zukowski hadn't mentioned it when he ran into her at the club a few days earlier.

He climbed down from the SUV, well aware that Greggson considered him a ridiculous figure for buying such a vehicle. It would never occur to Greggson that someone could so enjoy the companionship of dogs that he'd buy a van for their comfort rather than his own. Well, the man was leaving. Wouldn't hurt to maintain the facade a little longer.

"Help you with that?" he asked as the flames reached the bonfire and began to eat at the base.

"That's okay," said Greggson. "The rain this morning damped everything down and there's not enough wind to worry about. In fact, if you don't mind, I'd rather do this by myself."

To take away the suggestion of insult, he added, "Donna was looking forward to our Halloween party and burning this with the whole neighborhood around. This is sort of for her, you know?"

"Yeah, sure," said Malindorf. He started back to the SUV, then hesitated. "Where's the dog?"

"The what?"

"The stuffed dog. A toy golden retriever. I set it up there near the top the day after Donna went missing—when Zukowski and I restacked the pile. Remember?"

Greggson shrugged.

Heavy gray smoke began to billow up from the center as the fire encircled the base and climbed the sides, growing in intensity. The broken captain's chair now lay atop the bonfire, yet Malindorf distinctly remembered throwing it on before covering it with some heavy limbs. And that blue cardboard box was one of his own contributions. It had been stacked on the other side of the pile.

"You restacked the pile?" he asked curiously. "Why?"

The answer came to him immediately. "My God! She's in there, isn't she? You killed her and now you're burning her body!"

Greggson glared malevolently, then charged toward him with the pitchfork. Malindorf dodged, barely escaping the icepick-sharp tines, and the momentum of Greggson's lunge carried him through

the charred grass circle. He caught himself just short of the roaring blaze, but the points of the pitchfork pierced the blue box. He tried to jerk it free and a tangle of burning limbs tumbled toward him.

He abandoned the pitchfork and grabbed the shovel, but when he turned for Malindorf, he saw the little man scramble into his SUV and lock the doors. Howling with rage, Greggson swung the shovel at the windshield. The glass spiderwebbed beneath the blow yet did not break. The dogs inside barked furiously and leaped from seat to seat. Greggson barely heard. Again he swung at the window on the driver's side.

Malindorf ducked automatically but when his head reappeared, he had a cell phone against his ear and Greggson saw his lips moving above the mouthpiece. At that, James Greggson slammed the window a final time, then dropped the shovel and ran unsteadily through the cedars toward his house.

The volunteer firemen got there first. By the time they quenched the fire, Dwight Bryant had arrived with several deputies. They entered the house cautiously, weapons drawn, and called out for Greggson to give himself up.

They were too late.

James Greggson had drawn his own weapon.

They found his body on the bed. There was no note.

"But where did he hide her all that time?" asked Malindorf. It was several hours later and they stood on the flagstone terrace of his house to gaze across at the glare of portable floodlights that still illuminated the bonfire site. The spaniels lay at his feet, alert to his every move. "We looked. I looked. Your people looked. You even had a tracking dog."

That had puzzled Dwight, too, until he saw the heavy green nylon bag and the ropes that the West Colleton Fire Department volunteers had pulled from the center of the bonfire. The contents sickened them. It had been a very hot two months. But the bag and the ropes made him remember the six-man tent in Greggson's storeroom and that in turn reminded him of his Army survival training.

"He sealed her body in a couple of large plastic bags, which hid her scent from the dog, then he put her in the tent bag and hoisted her up into one of those bushy cedar trees. That's what you do to keep bears from getting your food if you're camping in the wilderness. Hang it from a high limb. He must have hung her against the trunk so that our eyes would pass right over another limb shape. People don't look up much when they're searching. We found the tree, by the way. Just off the path where they grow so

thick. We spotted a pulley screwed high up in the trunk."

One of the spaniels came and laid its large head against Malindorf's knee. Absently, he scratched the silky ear. "So he had it all planned and lied about the time he last saw her?"

Dwight nodded. "It's a good thing you noticed he'd restacked the pile."

"The stuffed dog was gone."

"Observant of you."

"Not especially." Malindorf looked at him sadly. "I gave it to her. The week before she died. A stand-in for the registered pup I was going to buy her for a divorce present."

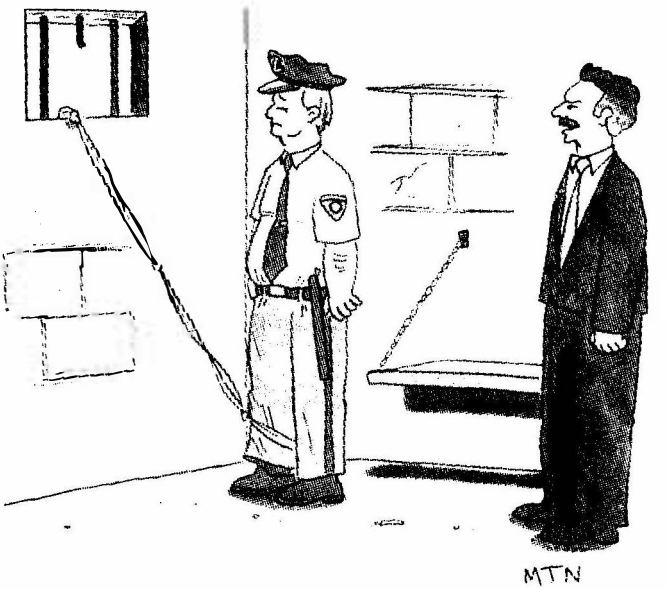
"Divorce?" Dwight said. "She and Zukowski really were having an affair?"

"You too?" Malindorf's voice was sardonic. "Good old Hank Zukowski. Tall, handsome, good physique—the automatic suspect when Greggson realized Donna was in love with someone else. He thought Zukowski gave her the dog. That's why he threw it on the burn pile. Never dawned on either of them that she might be tired of tall handsome men whose egos need massaging. That she might be ready for someone who could make her laugh, who could adore her."

"You?" asked Dwight.

Grief and wonder shone in Walter Malindorf's chubby face.

"Me," he said, and began to cry. ●



"I'm not placing blame here, Chasen.
I'm just asking when you first noticed a bedsheet was tied to your leg."

CRIME STORY HIGH

by William Bankier

It was a nightmare. He was in his car late in the afternoon on his way back from San Francisco. Because of the weekend carousing with his daughter Angela and her husband, his sleep cycle was all messed up. And yes, he had swallowed a "hair of the dog"—a glass of brandy—before hitting the road.

His eyes must have closed. Now they opened as the wheels bounced and shuddered through roadside dirt and bodies began bouncing off the windshield. He stopped the car and sat there, heart pounding. He became aware of yelling outside, behind him. And cursing and moaning. He got out and saw the bodies had orange vests on them. They appeared to be teenagers.

William Bankier's contributions to this magazine would take pages to list. He is one of the genre's most prolific storytellers. Yet he has never produced a mystery novel. Like the central character in this new tale, the shelves containing his life's work are filled with crime digests rather than books. What a fine body of work it is, though, and every new story seems to be better than the one before! ¶

"I Wake Up Screaming" was an excellent title. As a writer himself, Arthur P. Carney had always admired it. From the next cell, Logan was calling, "You all right?"

"I am now."

"I'm glad I don't have your dreams."

"A small price to pay," Carney murmured. "Considering what I did."

Dermot was on duty, as luck would have it. He loomed outside the bars now, billy club in hand. "Quiet in there, you. I'll move you down to solitary."

There was no use speaking to Dermot. After eight months in prison—eight months out of his twenty-year sentence—Arthur P. Carney had discovered most guards could take him or leave him alone. Some even showed a little respect for his position in life as a published writer. Same with the inmates, Logan in the next cell

being an example. Logan was a murderer but he had a story to tell. And when you listened with an open mind, the story made a certain amount of sense.

But Dermot was something else. He was holier than thou and he feasted on the sad history of his prisoners, Carney in particular. The guard had more to say. "You'll never have a restful night for as long as you live." He was enjoying this. "And when you finally die, you miserable creep, you'll burn in Hell."

"Get cancer!" Logan yelled as Dermot walked away. "Turn black and rot!"

Even though this parting shot from the neighboring cell was intended for his support, Carney did not require any more viciousness that night. He closed his eyes and summoned up the only thing left in his life he could depend on. Angela was coming for her regular visit that afternoon. He thought about her sweet face and gentle voice now as he tried to sleep.

"You don't look good," Angela said on the intercom telephone from her seat on the other side of the glass. Her intelligent eyes were reading every change in his mood, his posture, his tone of voice.

"Better now you're here." He began stating the obvious. "I feel so utterly worthless. No, it's worse than that. I ended five young lives. Kids on a work project clearing trash from beside the freeway. They're gone, their families are bereft, there's nothing I or anybody else can do."

"You can survive. You're the same good man you were before this terrible accident."

"I hear you." But Carney could not lift himself and his face remained a mask of tragedy.

"I've been thinking, Dad." Angela was a problem-solver, a trait she had inherited from her late mother. "When I closed the apartment in L.A., I brought all your copies of *Crime Monthly* to my place. There must be over a hundred of them, each with one of your stories in it."

"I haven't looked at those since they were published."

"And now you will. I'm going to bring them here. I'll get permission from the warden. You'll read your stories, Dad. Every one of them. They'll remind you of the contribution you've made to the happiness of countless readers."

Logan was bench-pressing 300 pounds in the corner of the yard where the weights were set out. Slapping chalk from his hands, he saw Arthur P. Carney watching him. "Is that the remains of a smile?"

"Had a good visit with my daughter."

"There you go."

"She's got this idea." Carney described her plan to furnish his

cell with his published stories from the last three decades.

"I wouldn't mind seeing some of those myself."

"You will." Carney felt obliged to add, "They're crime stories."

Logan laughed. "Do the bad guys get away?"

"Never." The writer cast his mind back. "Much of the time, the good guys don't, either."

The men began their slow walk along the perimeter. Carney felt comfortable with Logan. He was strong, so there was an element of protection. But there was something else. They had talked easily from day one. They laughed at the same things, feeding each other's humor. It made no difference that Logan was in for first-degree murder. Carney saw the truth. He, himself, had been more of a threat to society. Logan killed only his wife after years of mutual hostility and her affairs with other men. Carney, on the other hand, wiped out five teenagers along with all their hopes and dreams and those of their families.

Logan's eyes were forever on the alert. Like the famous novelist in Berlin, he was a camera. Guard towers, fences, roadways outside—he noted everything. He said now in his joking tone of voice, "Someday, Arthur, I'm going to take you away from all this."

"The prison is not my problem."

"You're deep, Arthur."

"And cold," the writer said.

With his copies of *Crime Monthly* arranged neatly on a shelf in his cell, Carney became aware of a shift in his situation that was slightly unsettling. He was beginning to feel at home. A few moment's reflection took care of that. He would remain in this small space until they carried him out, dead. There was no predicting how many or how few years that would be.

A new routine was now established. After morning roll call, and when he had delivered his breakfast tray back through the slot, he would select a couple of the magazines and stretch out on his cot. He had begun at the earliest publication date—almost thirty years ago. One realization struck him immediately. The editors had not been wrong in accepting his work and paying him for it. The stories were really fine.

Angela's wisdom in putting him on this track was sound. The writer began to feel better about himself. He was Arthur P. Carney; his record as a contributing member of society was confirmed.

And there was something else, an effect of his reintroduction to his work that was unexpected. As he read each story—as he slipped back into the subconscious mode that had taken him over when he wrote it—his heartbeat and his blood flow seemed to slow. A subtle warmth suffused Carney's limbs and his mind soared out from the confined space and into the free universe. It

was a kind of "high," as if he had consumed an illegal substance such as heroin or cocaine.

Today's story was entitled "Pitfield's Wife." It concerned a man who arrived in a small town and took up residence. He set up a variety store on Main Street, worked long hours, joined the Episcopal Church choir, eventually ran for the town council, and was elected. More than one local spinster had eyes for Pitfield but he was invulnerable, protected by a wife who lived 200 miles away in a large city. She could not join him, he explained, because she taught school and was dedicated to her students. She had promised to come as soon as that year's class graduated. But there was always a new set of youngsters entering her classroom and Pitfield's wife was dedicated to them.

The reader learns that the young Pitfield was installing new carpet on a flight of stairs in their honeymoon home. He left the work unfinished and went to attend to something else. The busy bride tripped and fell down the stairs, injuring herself fatally. At a coroner's hearing, the husband was found responsible for his wife's death. But the verdict carried no punishment since it was felt Pitfield would suffer the remainder of his life under the burden of his irresponsibility.

But Pitfield emerges heroically. Years later, on a winter's night, the town is enveloped in a heavy fall of snow. Pitfield is accustomed to taking a walk before bedtime and he is determined to do so that night. He is the only person on the streets. Making his way through heavy drifts near the railway station, he hears the sound of weeping. A dark shape across the street turns out to be a woman. She is a young widow who descended from a train not long ago. In the blizzard, there was no transport at the station. Foolishly, it has turned out, she decided to walk, following directions given her by the stationmaster.

The woman is not well, which explains her decision to leave Montreal and travel to family who reside in the town. She is exhausted now and coughing blood. Pitfield sees she is in immediate need of a doctor. He lifts her in his arms and begins to walk.

The journey to the hospital emergency room in the teeth of the blizzard would be hard under any circumstances. Carrying the woman, for a man of Pitfield's age, is a Herculean task. He arrives after nearly an hour and turns her over to the medical staff.

In the end, the woman is saved. But slumped in a chair in the waiting room, the old man is discovered dead of an overburdened heart.

Now, two things happened in the existence of prisoner Carney. One was a turnaround in the attitude of Dermot, the insensitive guard. When he saw all the *Crime Monthly* magazines in Carney's

cell and realized there was a story by Carney in each of them, he underwent a change in behavior. He approached the writer one day in the yard and began a whispered conversation.

"Can we talk?"

"Sure, Dermot."

"I write stories."

"Do you really? Good for you."

"I've never sold anything. But I'd like it if you could read something of mine."

"I'd be glad to."

"Maybe you could give me some advice."

"If I can."

The guard dragged from a pocket several pages of handwriting folded square. He pressed the manuscript into Carney's hand. "Don't tell anybody. If they find out I do this, they'll laugh at me."

"I won't tell a soul. I promise."

The other key event was the announcement from Larry Logan during their daily walk that he was planning an escape. Two other prisoners were in on the plan. "And you're invited, Carney. We go on Monday afternoon."

"I'm afraid not. Count me out."

"There's nothing to be afraid of." The hard man described his plan.

It was well worked out, Carney had to admit that, and he did. "But I'm not as desperate as I was. The magazines my daughter brought me, reading them has changed my mood."

"They're good, Arthur. The ones you gave me to read, I was impressed. But it's better to be outside."

"I will be. I've been talking to the warden. About time off for good behavior. I think he's impressed by my work. I could be out on parole by this time next year."

Dermot's story was not very good. It was about a prison situation where the inmates were all villains and the guards—one in particular named Durwood—were pillars of virtue. Carney struggled in his mind to find something positive to say about it. He did not want to crush the aspiring writer. Who could predict? Perhaps a further attempt might show improvement.

Eventually, he wrote a few lines of encouragement on the title page and brought the manuscript with him on his next period of yard time.

Logan was disappointed that Arthur P. Carney would not be coming with him on the escape. He had been lulling himself to sleep on many nights with a fantasy about life on the outside with his prison friend. They would spend all their time together. They would share an apartment—perhaps sleep in the same room.

Logan had grown up with an older brother in a bed next to his. That brother was now a business executive in Chicago. Logan had not contacted him in years. He was ashamed of his failed life and assumed his sibling shared that opinion.

Now the dream was shattered. Carney would rather remain locked up than avail himself of Logan's considerate offer.

He was walking alone today. Carney had excused himself, explaining he had work to do. But there he was, the elderly writer, in a far corner of the yard, deep in conversation with, of all people, Dermot! What could Carney possibly have to say to the swinish guard? Then, something even more puzzling happened. Carney took from his jacket pocket some folded sheets of paper and passed them to the guard in a furtive movement. What was going on?

Back in the cells, Logan pressed his face against the bars nearest Carney's space. "Whaddya hear from old Dermot?"

"Not much."

"Is he still your worst nightmare?"

"Not so bad these days."

"I guess people can change."

"Sometimes."

"The way you changed."

"Have I?"

"You know it." Logan struggled to keep his cool. "Anyway, Monday's the day. After that, you won't have to deal with Larry Logan ever again."

The atmosphere around the prison throughout Monday was tense. Carney realised he was not the only inmate who had been briefed on what Logan had in mind. Anticipation was a presence like a swarm of bees. But nobody could have predicted what would take place at four o'clock that afternoon. Carney was in the yard with the rest of the population. He soon confirmed that Logan was nowhere to be seen. Neither were two of his cronies who had always been strangers to the writer. Suddenly there was the rattle of automatic weapons fire from the direction of a warehouse behind the administration building. Guards in the towers were immediately on the alert. Other personnel ran from every direction towards the sound of the guns. People were shouting, but Carney could not make out the words. There was another short burst of gunfire—and that was all.

The prisoners were herded back into the cell blocks for a general lockdown. In a very short time, the news was passed. Logan had tried to bust out. He and two others made it through the laundry and into the garage. There, guards headed them off. One of Logan's companions was armed. In the ensuing exchange of fire, he was killed.

That night, Carney lay on his cot thinking of Larry Logan in

solitary, where he had been assigned for an extended period of time. The writer was experiencing a strong sense of "there but for the grace of God." Then he corrected that perspective.

It should be: there but for the wisdom of his daughter Angela. Without the benign effect of his stories (her idea), Carney might have been persuaded to join the escape. He himself might have ended up dead or wounded on the garage floor.

Larry Logan did not rejoin the prison population for six months. By that time, Carney had been promised his parole by the warden in the spring of the following year. He had nearly finished reading his stories, so it would be a timely departure.

He felt fortunate in not having had to confront his old companion Logan. When they did meet at last during yard time it was not a friendly reunion. "When are they letting you out?" Logan got right to the point.

"Next month."

"So it was worth it."

"I don't understand."

"Ratting on me. Telling Dermot when and where."

"About the escape?"

"They were waiting for us."

"I told nobody. You just had some bad luck."

"I saw you."

"You know me better than that."

"I thought I knew you." Logan walked away. Then he spun around and hurried back to Carney's side. He spoke softly into the other man's ear. "My friend died because of you. Now it's your turn."

Logan took himself to a far corner of the yard where he engaged in conversation with a prisoner who worked repairing vehicles in the depot. The man was a lifer with a poisoned soul. He was also a trusty with some access to prison corridors. He stood nodding his head as Logan delivered his message.

Angela's last visit before her father's release was conducted along with her architect husband. The couple described arrangements for setting Carney up in his own apartment within walking distance of their home in San Francisco. The visit was brief. His daughter was pregnant with the baby who would be the writer's first grandchild. Her husband joked about their acquiring a free babysitter.

Back in his cell, a little while after dinner, Carney prepared to read the last of his crime stories. Now that he was on good terms with Dermot, who appreciated the respect with which the talented prisoner treated his attempts at writing fiction, Carney's reading sessions had been made even more pleasant. The guard had begun supplying him with marijuana cigarettes. He lit up and began

inhaling the mind-altering smoke. Then he stretched out on his bunk and began to read.

The story was entitled "Dead in Darkness." It dealt with an electrical repairman who could not control his anger. His wife and teenaged son existed in fear of his rages, during which he would throw them about the house. A fellow repairman—no friend of the sadistic husband—becomes aware of what is going on. He advises the wife to call the police, but she is afraid to lose her financial security.

The climax of the story occurs during a widespread power failure. At night, in total darkness, the brute is working high up on a power pole when he is struck and killed by a rifle bullet. His killer is never found. A year later, the widow marries the caring electrical worker. Their lives are turned completely around—especially that of the teenaged son who now takes up the hobby of target-shooting with his doting stepfather.

Arthur P. Carney finished his cigarette. Slowly he turned the final pages of the story and set the magazine aside. He was drifting on a high and heady plane. He had no illusions about his work in comparison with the famous writers of literary history. But never mind. The stories pleased him. They did what Angela intended them to do.

Almost, but not quite. For most of his life, he had been an admirable and productive person. But in the end, he had driven a vehicle while impaired by alcohol and fatigue. And he had fallen asleep and left the paved surface. And he had crashed into five innocent young people doing an assigned job on the median. He had killed them. Snuffed out their lives like candles. His punishment had been this peaceful interlude in prison supplied with free meals and shelter and the companionship of people like Larry Logan and Dermot, who were really not that bad. They were people and they were alive . . . unlike the freeway kids who were moldering in their graves.

The writer managed to dismiss the negative thoughts. On his cloud, intoxicated with the illegal substance, inflated by judgment of his own work, Arthur P. Carney drifted towards sleep. He did not see the man outside in the corridor, Logan's manic friend from the motor pool. The man was carrying a bucket of liquid. With a wide swing and an upward lift, he threw the contents of the bucket into Carney's cell. Instantly, he ignited a book of matches and tossed it after the gasoline, which exploded into flames.

Carney was drenched. He sat up, confused, sucking for air. But the oxygen in the little room was quickly consumed and there was nothing for him to breathe. Falling back, never fully regaining consciousness, he stared at the shelf of magazines, his life's work. They seemed to be burning in the Devil's own fire. ●

REVENANT

by Gerald Pearce

The hand that picked up the diamond necklace was slender, beautifully cared for, no longer young. It belonged to Beth McCandless. Nothing else in the sumptuous little dressing room did, though, even Beth McCandless herself.

She held the necklace up to the high neck of her black dinner dress and studied the effect in the mirror.

She was tall and slender, her upswept hair graying in flamboyant streaks. At forty-seven she was still gorgeous, unresentful of the subtle signs of erosion beginning to show around her eyes.

After a couple of seconds she ignored the reflected necklace and stared at something new in the reflection of those eyes. Something she didn't want Eric to see.

Age had nothing to do with it. She'd seen it in fresh-faced college girls.

Something naked, ravaged.

She bit the inside of her lower lip, and heard urgent footsteps, muffled by carpeting, stride past the master bedroom door and recede down the stairs.

She left the dressing room and crossed the bedroom in her stockinged feet before she realized she still held the necklace. Her free hand on the doorknob, she strained to hear footsteps begin to cross the tiled floor of the hall below.

She had to hide that ravaged look from Jordan as well as Eric. She took a quick breath, pulled the door open, stepped out onto the landing.

Jordan was reaching the front door. Usually well groomed, he

An Englishman who grew up in the Middle East and spoke Arabic by the age of five, Gerald Pearce might have had a career in diplomacy. Instead, he got hooked on the work of Sax Rohmer and Edgar Rice Burroughs and decided to be a writer. Though he is a published novelist, his forte is the long story or novella. His work spans the mystery, science fiction, and fantasy genres, and much of it could be considered mainstream.

had on worn jeans and an old leather jacket she hadn't seen since his high school days. Now he was a junior in college.

She called his name—too sharply. He turned and looked up at her. His face was pale and stiff.

"Yes?"

Her mouth quivered. All she could think of to say—inanely—was, "Going out?"

"Yes."

Offering nothing. No explanation.

"A date?"

A hesitation. Then: "I have to meet someone. In Hollywood."

"Oh." She tried to smile. It jittered badly. "In Hollywood."

Unexpectedly he volunteered, "On Western Avenue." His voice had an edge of finality. He was nineteen, she couldn't demand details.

. . . The necklace!

"Well . . . look. Tell me what you think."

She held the necklace to her throat, willing herself to calm.

"Pretty," Jordan said.

"You . . . don't think it's too much?"

He actually took a few seconds to think. But when he spoke, though his words maintained the forms of courtesy, his voice was as hard and remorseless as a latchless door slamming in a high wind.

"Maybe, for that outfit. But ask Eric."

"He's in the shower."

"He'll be out. Mom—I have to go."

"Yes. Yes, of course." She couldn't even say be careful. Careful of what? They had never made a habit of sharing. Children were simply told—as much as was good for them. But . . . but this emergency had come up so suddenly. "H-have a good time, dear."

"You too. G'night."

The door closed behind him.

She returned to the bedroom, let out an uneven breath, took the necklace into her dressing room and put it away. Then she crossed to the bathroom door and pushed it open to warm steamy air from Eric's shower.

A big man of fifty, with thinning sandy hair, thirty pounds overweight, he was standing at the washbasin finishing shaving. Even with a towel wrapped around his slack middle he radiated authority and competence. He ran a statewide private security service. His men and women patrolled neighborhoods for homeowner associations, guarded a chain of banks and a number of movie studios, and did night-watchman duties at businesses from San Diego to Reading. He was late because a dense fog had kept his plane on

the ground in San Francisco two hours beyond its scheduled take-off time.

He said, "Don't be shy. Come on in."

"I'll get all wilted." She stepped back from the door. "Eric . . . am I a good mother?"

"Hell yes." He rinsed off his safety razor.

"Not . . . too possessive? Too determined to keep them young and . . . well, subservient?" He threw her a surprised look, then mopped his face with a damp washcloth. She went on hurriedly, "Jordan's chafing at the bit. He's so restless, so impatient. Just now he couldn't wait to get away. . . ."

"He's nearly twenty. Probably has a hot date and can't wait to get her pants down."

"But—" She made a helpless gesture. Eric would think of that. Men were so easy to please. "It's not that. I know it's not that."

Eric McCandless shrugged into a thick terrycloth robe and came out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

He asked, "What's the matter, honey? It's not really about Jordan, is it? Is it Kimberly? Is Kim okay?"

"Oh, she's fine. We had a long phone chat last Monday." Kim was two years younger than Jordan, a freshman at UC Santa Barbara.

"I knew it wasn't either of them," Eric said. "When the kids are in trouble, or sick, you get all strong and steely because they need you. Now you seem . . . a bit fragile. What's the matter?"

Beth heard her heart trying to shatter her ribcage. Time to tell him. Her throat was suddenly dry. She flicked her tongue over dry lips.

"He's back." Her voice was a husk. "Mike is. Mike Gault."

Her first husband.

A vertical line between his eyebrows got fractionally deeper, then relaxed.

He said mildly, "He can't be. Remember? Mike's dead."

Jordan wasn't so sure.

He drove his little yellow Geo east on Sunset. The boulevard snaked and dipped through dark hills among towering eucalyptus trees, came down into the flat of Beverly Hills and thickening traffic, through West Hollywood and the Strip. He took Holloway down to Santa Monica and kept going east.

Funny how he'd almost recognized that voice. It had sounded tired and dusty but with an unusual clarity of diction, an essential musicality. . . .

He had picked up the phone in the hall and said, "Yes?" and there had been a pause, then the voice had said, "Jordan? Jordan Gault?"

"McCandless," Jordan had said automatically.

"So he adopted you. Good. Everyone says he's a nice guy."

The vague familiarity of the voice was suddenly oppressive. Jordan said, "Who is this?"

"This may come as a bit of a shock. My name is Michael Gault. I'm your dad."

A spreading cold was born in Jordan's gut. He should have slammed down the receiver. He didn't. Why?

He said unpleasantly, "My father is dead. He disappeared when I was five. Five years later he was declared legally dead. So obviously you're a liar."

But he knew he'd heard that voice *somewhere* . . .

It said in his ear, "How's Kimmie? Sorry—she's probably outgrown that diminutive by now. Look, Jordan—"

Jordan interrupted harshly, "What do you want?"

After a pause the dusty voice with the underlying music said, "To talk to my kids. To apologize to them. Then to get out of their lives again, if that's what they want."

"You can't see Kim. She's in college in—out of town." No need to tell him where to find her. "Where can I find you?"

"Let's meet on neutral turf somewhere. How well do you know Western Avenue, below Santa Monica?"

"I know where it is."

"Just south of Melrose, on the west side of the street, there's a coffee shop called Emilio's. Could you be there at eight-thirty this evening?"

"Yes. And you'll be there, ready to prove you're who you say you are," and the man on the phone had said that wouldn't be hard, and Jordan had hung up on him.

If the caller was Michael Gault, he had never been successful and was now probably a down-and-outer aiming to gouge his former wife for money. Otherwise why choose to meet Jordan in a rundown neighborhood that was home to semiliterate day laborers and dropouts and illegals?

Whoever this guy was, even if he was Mike Gault, he was going to wish he'd never tried to mess with Jordan McCandless.

Still in his bathrobe, Eric McCandless hung up the bedroom phone.

"See?" he said. "Even if he is back from the dead, Mike Gault can't touch you."

Beth tried to keep the edge of hysteria out of her voice. "I heard half the conversation." Damn! She'd made it sound like an accusation.

Patiently Eric said, "I relayed it to you as it was going on. Did you think I was making it up?"

She flared from the edge of the bed, "Don't patronize me!"

"Honey, listen. That really was Jack Goodwin. He's been a real live lawyer for years—he's been *our* lawyer for years. He said that even if you're right, even if Mike Gault is back, he can't do anything. He can assert no family rights. He has no visitation rights with the kids, no right to any property that may have been his. He's no longer your husband. I am. The only thing he has left is his name."

She stared at him. Part of her mind had gone numb. How much could she tell him?

She said slowly, "His name's enough. He can trade on it. Michael Gault, the art gallery owner who disappeared years ago, suddenly back from the dead—an out-of-work day laborer. The papers would have a field day. Especially those awful supermarket tabloids. They'd crucify us for not taking him in as part of the family. And the kids . . ."

The kids. How would they react to someone who said he was their father but who was everything they had learned to despise: a quitter, a loser, a grubby freeloader with dirt-ingrained hands and worn shoes and clothes from Goodwill?

"Oh, I dunno," Eric said. "Kids are flexible. Ours might enjoy a moment of notoriety."

"I know them better. They're *my* kids."

He absorbed that one. Beth's hands went up to cover her suddenly slack mouth, her eyes tragic.

She whispered behind her fingers, "What a terrible thing to say. I'm sorry, Eric. I'm so sorry."

He shook his head, put a finger to his lips. "Hush. Nothing to be sorry about. I never could have kids. Horny as a goat and sterile as a mule. Smartest thing I ever did was marry you. Two good-looking kids and a sexy dame for the price of a marriage license."

He grinned. He had a disarming grin, friendly and good-natured. It had softened up a lot of stiff prospects at sticky points in contract negotiations, and once, she was sure, had made a lot of women wet their pants. She couldn't let it get to her now.

She said, "Didn't you think I might be after you for your money?"

A so-what shrug. The grin stayed put.

"I always figured that was part of the initial attraction," Eric said. "I thought, well, she'll be worth it, I'll just have to make sure there's always enough. It's worked so far."

She said hurriedly, "It was only a consideration at the very beginning. I really do love you. That's not the problem. Not yours, and certainly not mine."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes!"

"About Mike? Tell me why you think he'll show up as an out-of-work day laborer, almost a bum."

She twisted her hands together, bit her lower lip. Her voice scraped past her throat, a tortured whisper.

"Because that's what he is, I've seen him. He's been here."

He became still, thoughtful, but still didn't seem worried enough. He should be.

She said waspishly, "Are you determined to loaf around in your bathrobe all night and miss a party given by one of your major clients?"

He showed a bare flicker of impatience.

"It's not a sit-down party, for Pete's sake. It's one of those show-biz cattle calls. Everyone who's ever done business with York/Feldman gets to pig out on free booze and great food served buffet-style from a hundred yards of tables set up in the basement of the Century Plaza Hotel. We can arrive any time before the cleanup staff."

He dug socks and underwear out of a drawer.

"So he was here. Did he just walk up and ring the front doorbell when I was up north?"

"Not . . . quite." *Calm!* she ordered herself. He'll discount anything that looks like silly emotionalism. Her shoeless feet silent on the bedroom carpeting, she crossed to a straight-backed chair against a wall by a louvered window. She sat at the edge of the seat, clasped her hands in her lap.

She said, her voice distant and unfamiliar to her ears, "The day before yesterday, Wednesday, Fran Cartwright picked me up for lunch at the Beverly-Wilshire. When we got back she was running late for an appointment so didn't turn into the driveway, just pulled into the curb. I got out and she started away and I began walking up the drive when someone spoke behind me. Normally I'd have just kept going, but there was something, well, *shocking* about this voice, and it was speaking French. It said to my back, *Partir, c'est mourir un peu; revenir, c'est savoir ce que c'est que d'être un revenant.* It's a quote or a proverb, I don't know which. It means to go away is to die a little, to return is to know what it is to be a ghost."

"Okay," Eric said.

Beth went on, "I got this horrible, clutching *suspicion.* I mean, the voice was familiar but wrong, but together with the French quote, which had once had some significance for us way back . . . suddenly I just had to *see.* I didn't want to but *had* to. I turned to look and there he was. He'd been sitting on the bench under the bus stop sign. Still tall and skinny but older; he's only a year older than you but looks way over sixty, wasted, in dusty work clothes and an old baseball cap and worn cowboy boots.

"He just said, Hello, Beth, and I gasped and stammered something like, What are you doing here? or What do you want? or maybe both. And he said, Just wanted to see where you live, maybe get a look at the kids, then I saw you getting out of that car.

"I said I hope you feel like a ghost, you certainly look like one, and you may *not* see the kids. He said, very politely, Why not? I said because they don't know you, you walked out of their lives, it's been fifteen years, you're a total stranger! My God, I was yelling at this man in public, *anyone* could have been listening. So I got my voice down and told him to go away or I'd call the police. He said, Do you really want to do that?—it wouldn't take long for some snoop to realize that I was *that* Michael Gault.

"I said, That's blackmail! and he said in that same tired, patient, irritating way that it really wasn't, he really only wanted to see the kids, would I give it some thought? He'd call me tomorrow if I'd give him the phone number; so I did, just to get rid of him, and ran up the driveway."

Eric asked, "He didn't follow you, did he?"

She shook her head.

"Did he call the next day?"

"Oh yes! Ten o'clock yesterday morning."

He had put on a white dress shirt and was adjusting it to his wide shoulders.

He said, "You could have called me, you know."

"I almost did." Which wasn't quite true. She hadn't wanted Eric to know about it. Never. Ever. If only she could solve it on her own. "But you were in the Bay Area on business. I couldn't say, hey, drop everything and come home. Besides, what could you do?—even you? So I took the phone call, and he said, Have you thought it over? and I said Meet us at Plummer Park at two o'clock, near the children's sand pit. God!—I didn't know if the sand pit was still there. I hadn't seen the place in years, since I used to take the kids there, before *us*.

"Anyway I was there at two o'clock. I parked in the lot of Santa Monica and went in past the Senior Center and the bird sanctuary into the play area. Not too many people there, a few preschool kids and their mothers, a few elderly people playing chess or cards under the trees, and . . . there he was, reading a newspaper on a bench by the sand pit, waiting . . .

"He'd got himself all spruced up. Cheap work clothes, but clean. He'd even had a haircut. I said, There you are, or something like that, and he ditched the paper and stood up. Showing he still knew how to be polite, I guess. He said, You're alone, sounding a bit surprised. I said, You didn't think I'd bring Kim and Jordan, did you? He said, well, you said *we'll* be there, I guess I was wrong, huh? I said, I've no intention of exposing them to their good-for-

nothing runaway father, even if I thought you were remotely interested. I've got what you're interested in here in my purse. Two thousand, four hundred in cash. Not a gift—I'm buying something: your disappearance. If I ever see or hear from you again, you will regret it very much, and don't for a second imagine that's an empty threat.

"You know he still kept on pretending?—shook his head as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then he said something very insulting. He said, Same old Beth, you *would* think it was all about money. And he just turned and wandered off toward the street . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Eric stepped into his pants.

He said, "Twenty-four hundred bucks isn't a lot of money these days."

"It is if you're down-and-out. My God, today we've got aerospace engineers doing yard-cleanup work for what they can get. If I'd offered him more, he'd've thought he had me scared. Then he'd've been back for more. I'd promised I'd make him very sorry but I've no idea how to do it. I know he didn't take me seriously. He might you, though. Take you seriously, I mean."

Eric chose a tie from the rack hanging on the inside of his closet door. It was dark, quietly luxurious. He raised his collar and looped the tie around his neck.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "I'm sure we've got guys on the payroll who'd rough him up for a little extra rent money. But I don't know who they are. And if something went wrong, the publicity would be worse than if you'd gone to the cops in the first place. But I think you're right. Mike's not scared. And maybe—just maybe—that's because his conscience is clear, and he's not planning anything."

"I know him too well. All right—I *knew* him. He was a weakling and a loser and he still is."

"But he's not scared." Eric added gently, "But you are, aren't you?"

She nodded mutely.

"You haven't told me why."

"The kids. He wants what we've got and he can't have it."

"Of course not." The grin again, easy, understanding. How dare he pretend to understand! He didn't understand how worried she was. How frightened. "There's no way he can hurt you. What's to be afraid of?"

"He has something. He's *got* to have something. And then this evening, that business with Jordan . . ."

"You think he's contacted Jordan?"

She waited through rigid seconds before shaking her head, a movement so tiny it was almost a tremor.

"No. I don't know. All I know is Jordan said he had to see some-

one in Hollywood, on Western Avenue. A . . . girl? An abortionist? Oh God!—a *drug* dealer? I never thought of that."

"Any reason why you should have?"

Another pause. Another almost invisible head shake.

"Well, that's good, anyway," Eric said. "Look, Beth. We can't do much about Mike right now, but we could go looking for Jordan. That little yellow car shouldn't be hard to find."

"And the York/Feldman party?"

"They'll understand a family emergency."

". . . All right," Beth said without enthusiasm. All she could do was cling to the hope that the whole problem was a girl in trouble. Or even a drug dealer. That kind of problem could be handled.

Approaching Western Avenue, Santa Monica Boulevard was busy, sluggish, resentful. The floodlit blank wall of the Hollywood Sears store loomed impregnable and windowless on the left, after which small well-lighted shop windows displayed garish merchandise along both sides of the boulevard and people crowded the sidewalks.

Jaws clenched, Jordan waited through a red light at St. Andrew's Place.

This part of town he knew only vaguely. His college, UCLA, was in the other direction. Always when he had to go to downtown L.A. he took the freeway. Here, half the signs were in Spanish and most of the people were stocky and darker-skinned. He hoped he wouldn't look Anglo enough—rich enough—*enviable* enough to be a provocative self-advertising target.

The light changed. A few laggard pedestrians were caught in the crosswalk. Jordan ground his teeth and waited for them, then hurried the Geo forward toward an illuminated overhead sign that said WESTERN AVENUE. He took a right turn, and his fulminating impatience became something else. Something like panic. His heart hammered, his tongue and mouth were dry and hopeless. He was at the point of no return. He'd had no training for anything like this, he was plunging into furiously grown-up waters without first learning how to swim.

He drove half a block on automatic pilot before his determination got the panic under control. At least he hadn't plowed into anyone. And it wasn't as if he had no plan at all. It even had a contingency clause in case of emergency. The means to carry it out was a heavy weight in an inside pocket of his leather jacket.

He noted almost subliminally that a lot of store signs were now often in Korean and whatever that weird writing was, that Melrose Avenue couldn't be far off, and that Emilio's must be somewhere down in that neon tangle on the right side of the street.

He found Emilio's a couple of blocks later, wedged in between a furniture store and some sort of discount house. No identifying

neon, but running the width of the narrow facade was a painted sign lit by three shaded incandescent bulbs angling over from above on skinny metal arms.

All the spaces in the parking lane were taken. At the next intersection he turned right and found an empty space in back of a row of vehicles. He slid the Geo in behind them, killed the motor, doused the lights.

Time to do it.

He got out of the car, closed the door, made sure it was locked. He crammed the keys into a jeans pocket and walked back to Western. Then a short walk north brought him to Emilio's.

He couldn't see inside because the picture window was blinded by handwritten poster-board signs in English and Spanish advertising cheap breakfasts of eggs and bacon or ham or Mexican sausage and hash browns, burger-and-fries combos with X-tra large Cokes. A smaller sign said OPEN. Another on the door said PULL.

He did that, and stepped up into the smell of coffee and short-order cooking and a hint of Mexican spices. It was at once any cheap American coffee shop and something exotic from the Third World, busy but not crowded with Asians, Latinos, a few Anglos. None of the Anglos looked over thirty, so the man he was looking for wasn't here.

Maybe he'd thought better of it!

Nice idea, but not likely.

A hefty black-haired woman in a pink waitress uniform came out from behind the cash register smiling, one finger raised.

"One?" Even that one syllable came in an accent.

"I'm meeting someone," Jordan said. "Can I sit where I can watch the door?"

She pointed to a booth in the back and accompanied him there. He sat down, looked the length of the room past the cash register to the front door. She offered him a menu. He said he'd just have a black coffee until his party showed up, awkwardly aware that he was proclaiming his unease, that she was reading it as antagonism and replacing the smile with a chilly uncordial courtesy as welcome as a slap in the face.

She went away and brought him a thick-walled mug of steaming black coffee. As she set it down in front of him he saw beyond her the coffee shop door open. A tall man wearing a baseball cap and worn denim clothes came in.

Neither frail nor vigorous. Ordinary. *Worn.* Contained. A fist of dread clamped in Jordan's gut.

The man's eyes roamed the other customers briefly, saw Jordan, nodded.

Hunched behind his coffee cup, Jordan watched his unhurried approach. He stopped two feet away. The hair showing below the

baseball cap was almost white.

"Mr. Jordan McCandless?"

Jordan said, "Who are you?"

"My name is Michael Gault. I believe we're related. Your face, with appropriate gender modifications, has the same bone structure as your mother's."

"How would you know?"

"I used to know her." The hint of a smile. It was gone in an instant. "And I saw her yesterday." He slipped a folded-over manila envelope out of a pocket. "My bona fides, which include a snapshot of you and me together when we lived at that place on Harper. Which isn't there anymore, as I learned this afternoon. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Do what you like."

The hefty black-haired waitress came over with a menu. The man who called himself Michael Gault ordered a piece of cherry pie and coffee and slid onto the opposite bench while Jordan slid the contents of the envelope onto the table.

The man said, "You can be as truculent and antagonistic as you like, because you have the right. But you can't change who I am."

Like the voice Jordan had heard on the phone, this one was thin, tired, dusty, but with educated diction and that elusive musicality . . .

Jordan examined the snapshot. His earlier dread had at least been tinged with hope for a positive outcome from all this. Now the hope withered and died. The kid in it could well be himself when he was four or so. The man hunkered beside the kid could easily be a younger version of the man across the table. Something like a memory of the picture being taken pushed remorselessly against the boundaries of his awareness.

The waitress brought the pie and the coffee.

Jordan said, "If the guy in this picture is you, then you've sure gone to hell in a hearse in fifteen years."

"I guess I have."

Jordan sorted through the other items.

"You've got a twenty-year-old driver's license issued to Michael Gault. The picture on it might be you. You've got a couple of more recent licenses made out to Sean Freundlich, and laminated Social Security cards in both names. Who the hell is Sean Freundlich?"

"No idea. Some guy who dropped a card case out of his wallet in the men's john at an I-5 rest stop in Oregon. By the time I came by and found it, he was long gone—eleven P.M. and nobody there. I knew I'd have to be someone else for a while. I'd need a Social Security number if I was going to get any sort of work, and his would do. Credit cards in the case, too. Using these would be forgery and theft and who knows what else. I didn't want the new me to start life as a criminal, so I hacked them up and disposed of them."

"For all you know, Sean Freundlich was a banker, a giant of industry, a Texas oil man. You became . . . what? A bean picker? Day laborer? Panhandler?"

"Most of those, at one time or another. And I've swept out sleazy movie theaters, worked canneries, washed dishes in greasy spoons, cleared fire trails for the Forest Service, you name it. If it's temporary, I've probably done it."

"Your speech is educated. How'd you pass for a working stiff? Say you were a teacher on sabbatical?"

"Mostly by doing without a lot of commas and subordinate clauses."

Jordan almost said, "Assuming you are Michael Gault," but caught himself. He wasn't ready to assume anything of the sort. That he might have to soon ignited a small but intense flame of fury at the base of his brain.

He said the rejected words anyway.

"Assuming you are Michael Gault, what do you want?"

"Just to touch base with you and Kim."

"Kim's away at college. I'm here. You've seen me."

The man who said he was Michael Gault took a small bite of cherry pie, chewed, swallowed.

Jordan said, "You don't want much, do you? Now: What do you *want?*"

"I haven't seen you and Kim for . . . what? A good fifteen years. Since nineteen eighty-six. Do you think it so strange that I might want to see how you've grown, what you've turned into?"

"Your kids never meant one damn thing to you. You deserted us. All I can remember from before was all that quarreling and fighting you did with Mom. And then you just up and disappeared. Mom had to petition to get you declared legally dead. You've been dead since nineteen ninety-two. In fifteen years you never once wrote or anything. So forget all that fatherly bullshit. What do you really want?"

For a split second, something Jordan had said had sent a flicker of emotion across the impassive, worn face. It was gone in a moment. Michael Gault took a sip of coffee, set down his cup, nodded almost invisibly.

"You're right, of course. I did desert you. Deserted wife, children, business, everything. But oddly enough, not after some deliberate, conscious decision. Pressures had sort of built up . . ." Perhaps he had thought of saying what kind of pressures but decided not to. "I was in a jungle river and piranhas were chasing me. One day I just flipped. Dropped out. Otherwise, I'd have had a plan of some sort, arranged access to money, or taken more with me than the chance contents of a half-empty wallet, not left everything up to blind chance. But I guess I was lucky I did. If I'd had a plan, some-

one could probably have figured it out. Since I hadn't, blind chance was the only way anyone could have found me."

"Lucky you," Jordan said. "You lucked into an irresistible impulse. Or was it temporary insanity?"

"Not legally, because I knew it would have been wrong to use the Freundlich credit cards. Not that the law talks much sense about insanity, temporary or otherwise. Maybe I was just lucky. I flipped, dropped out, hid, and stayed hidden. Even after I . . . unflipped."

Jordan's eyes drilled into him.

"Why?"

A tiny shrug.

"No piranhas where I was." Michael Gault took some more coffee. After a pause he added slowly, almost meditatively, "I see the Gault Gallery's still in business. Elizabeth Gault McCandless, Proprietor. I guess when I disappeared the board decided to keep going. One of the advantages of being incorporated in Nevada: simpler rules. Only three of us on the board: me, your mother, and that part-time accountant guy, Frank Wells. Beth and Frank made up a majority, they could do whatever they wanted. They made a go of it, fine. I wouldn't have thought your mom would be that interested."

"With two kids to support?" Jordan snarled. "The gallery enabled us to hang on, that's all. When you were declared legally dead Mom remarried. We don't need the gallery anymore. My stepdad encourages Mom to keep it going to remind her she's an achiever, not just one of those desperate wives totally dependent on their husbands. She let him put a little money into the gallery at the beginning, when things were pretty rough, but since then she's kept it moving. And it's not yours anymore. None of it. Not even the dust on a shelf in a broom closet."

"Fine. Wouldn't want it. When I saw your mother yesterday she offered me twenty-four hundred bucks to get lost."

"Wasn't enough, huh?"

"I told her my being here had nothing to do with money. I couldn't convince her."

"Me neither. It's plain to see how rich you've gotten."

The still, careful, impassive face looked at Jordan with a hint of wonderment. Which slid away, leaving it haggard. Slowly Gault shook his head.

After a while he said, "Has she got your sister as well trained as you?"

Driving east on Franklin Avenue, Eric McCandless stopped for a red light on Western.

"Nothing commercial up that way," he said, pointing north, and eased the Acura onto Western southbound. There was a Chevron station to the left, a florist's to the right, a Rite Aid drugstore with

a big parking lot, few cars in it, none of them the yellow Geo.

Beth's front teeth clamped down on the inside of her lower lip.

Eric's presence conveyed his confident physicality, his quiet assurance. Or rather memories of them. Beth writhed inwardly. Memories weren't realities. Eric might have been a small thin nobody hired to drive the car, without interest in the destination or concern for the outcome.

A couple of blocks below Franklin they hit Hollywood Boulevard: giant construction site on one corner, fast-food joint across the street, old buildings on the southern corners, no sign of the Geo. They drove on to Sunset. Porno movie house on the left, big hardware store parking lot on the right. No Geo there, or in the lots on both sides of the street below the intersection.

Nor in the curbside parking lanes. Lots of people, lots of cars, hardly room to park a bicycle. Western crossed Santa Monica Boulevard. Beth felt a surge of anxiety.

Less than two miles west was Plummer Park, where yesterday she'd met an emaciated wraith in charity-store clothes. That he might have arranged to meet Jordan hereabouts no longer seemed merely possible: It was more than likely. If only it could turn out to be the imagined drug dealer. Or a pregnant girl, maybe an underage Mexican, a skinny Asian with little English, or a black . . . Why didn't she think it could be anything that innocent?

They crossed Melrose. How could a neighborhood like this be so brightly lighted? Signs in English and Spanish and—what was that totally foreign language? English letters spelled out Third World syllables. What had the country come to? She hadn't been this far south on Western since . . . God, for so long—

The car slowed suddenly.

"There," Eric said.

Through a stream of pedestrians stepping off the sidewalk at an intersection, she saw Jordan's car parked snugly just around the corner. Then Eric was turning into the cross street, passing the Geo. Half a block ahead, a pickup was unexpectedly pulling away from a parking space. Eric slid the Acura into it, turned off the lights, killed the ignition.

Beth said in a flat, childlike voice, "What now?"

"We check out all the public places," Eric said. "Stores, bars, coffee shops."

"God, I feel like I need a passport just to walk along that sidewalk."

"You really won't, though, you'll be okay."

Beth unlocked and opened her door. Minutes later they were in front of Emilio's.

The waitress came over with a half-full Silex coffeepot in one hand

and her eyebrows raised. Michael Gault put a hand over his cup and shook his head.

"Go ahead," Jordan said savagely, "I'm buying."

Gault shook his head again. Jordan let the waitress refill his cup then watched her retreat to behind the counter down by the cash register. Three feet beyond the cash register, the front door opened.

The blaze of rage at the base of his brain suddenly darkened, chilled. His mother entered from the street. His stepfather followed. Both wore overcoats, his camel-colored, hers black. They reeked of money.

Beth spotted Jordan at once. She waited for Eric to close the door, then pointed up the aisle. Jordan's sense of commanding the situation drained away as hopelessly as water through a net. The waitress tried to waylay them with a pair of menus but Eric smiled and pointed toward Jordan. Gault saw where Jordan's attention was locked and turned and craned his neck. He turned back, shrugged faintly.

When Beth and Eric reached the booth, Gault tried awkwardly to stand. There wasn't room.

"For God's sake," Beth hissed. "Who're you trying to fool?"

"This your husband?" Gault asked. He stuck out a hand. "Mike Gault."

Eric shook the hand. "Eric McCandless."

Jordan said, "This guy's been telling me all about how he flipped out in nineteen eighty-six and went on vacation. Then he flipped back and decided to stay where he was because there were no piranhas there. What he didn't say was how long he spent in the loony bin."

"No time at all," Gault said. "Just a few months as an outpatient up in Salem way back when."

"They let you roam around free?" Beth's throat was so tight her voice barely escaped it. "They let you loose to come down here to crawl out of the gutter onto a gravy train with my name on it? You're trying to screw with the wrong people. You're a failure, a nobody—a *ghost*, and a crazy one at that."

"All I want—" Gault began, but Eric overrode him with a brief apology, then turned to Jordan.

"Don't you have something of mine, Jordan? That you borrowed from the middle drawer of my desk?"

Reluctantly, Jordan nodded.

"Can I have it back, please?"

Jordan reached into his leather jacket, drew out a .32 revolver in a pocket holster. Eric's big hand covered it instantly and put it in his overcoat side pocket—but not before Mike Gault had seen it.

He looked disappointed. He sighed and said, "I started to tell you that all I wanted was to touch base with my kids, but I'm not

getting anywhere, am I? And people are beginning to stare. So if you'll all excuse me . . ."

He slid along the booth bench to stand up. Beth stopped him with a strident question.

"Running away—to plan your next move?"

Mike Gault shook his head slowly.

"I wrote to the kids a few times back in nineteen eighty-nine." He pushed himself upright. "You intercepted and suppressed those letters, didn't you? When I didn't hear back I got all nervous about piranhas again and stayed underground. You couldn't get me declared legally dead without perjuring yourself. So are you legally married? Well, give my love to Kim." He dug a few bills out of his jacket pocket, dropped a five onto the table beside his plate. "I never could make enough money for you, could I, Beth? . . . Sorry, Jordan."

He turned to go. Beth had already slid a hand into Eric's overcoat pocket. It came out with the revolver. Her other hand dragged off the holster. Jordan said, "No-o-o-o-" in a shocked kid's voice as she pointed the gun and shot her ex-husband three times in the back.

He stumbled forward and fell flat on his face and never moved a muscle.

Eric lunged, caught Beth's arm, and forced it upward. After a moment's startled silence, the waitress started screaming and customers began a frantic rush for the door.

Then the front door was matter-of-factly closing itself, cutting off the inrush of cold air, and the place was almost empty. The waitress abruptly stopped screaming. In the sudden quiet Jordan heard a hurried Latino voice from the kitchen calling Emergency.

Eric had wrenched the gun from Beth's hand and crammed it into a pocket, but still held her arm as though expecting her to produce another one from somewhere. He looked ghastly, shocked stupid, like a man who finds he's aged thirty years in two seconds.

Beth took a deep breath and was suddenly as calm as the surface of a windless lake.

"Do let go, Eric." Her voice was unstrained, placid. He released his grip on her arm. She massaged it gently. "What happens now?"

"We . . . wait for the cops," he said in a husk.

She looked briefly puzzled. Then the penny dropped. She pointed to what lay at the foot of the counter halfway to the door. "For *that?*"

The waitress came from behind the counter, looked down, made a smothered sound, and crossed herself.

Eric said, "I think you killed him."

Jordan stared at his mother. His eyes were dark bruises of nightmare.

She said with a touch of impatience, "Oh, honey, don't look so grim. I'm sure you only brought that little gun along to scare him. What I did was an exorcism." ●

2002 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

In the days and weeks immediately following September Eleventh, as we began to see comments by mystery writers posted on the Internet, we were struck by how many said the terror had rendered them unable to write. Some were overcome by a sense that the themes they had been treating in their fiction were trivial in the post-9/11 world. Some were simply silenced by shock. Was mystery fiction to be another casualty of the attacks? we wondered. Would even fictional murder be anathema to writers and readers?

It didn't take long for our fears to be allayed. After a short lapse, the manuscripts began to come in again, in all their fascinating variety. We would go on as before; after all, *EQMM* had published through several wars. It was started in 1941, and proved a consolation to American servicemen and women, for whom a special editon was printed. It may seem strange that a genre whose commonest subject is murder should provide entertainment and comfort in terrible times. The reason may be that in a mystery story, however abominable the crime, justice usually prevails. Order is brought back to the world.

We hope you'll use this ballot to vote for your favorite stories of 2002. Paradoxically, 2002 was a particularly strong year for the magazine; if there was a temporary silence, it quickly yielded to a colorful array of voices—sad and funny, light and dark, tough and cozy. Please refresh your memory of the year's highlights by referring to the index on pages 140-142 of this issue. Then mark your choices on the back of this page. It's a good way of letting the authors know their work is appreciated.

The rules for 2002 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be

accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 2002 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 2003 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 2002 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: **The Editors**
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

The Problem of Bailey's Buzzard

by Edward D. Hoch

Finally! Twenty-eight years and fifty-odd cases after his debut, series character Dr. Sam Hawthorne, whose reminiscences of the 1930s and '40s provide the format for the stories, settles the question did he remain Northmont's most eligible bachelor. It's December, 1941, and Sam has two impossible crimes to solve while coming to terms with the onset of war. . . .

Annabel and I were married on December sixth as planned (Dr. Sam Hawthorne informed his guest as he refilled their glasses from the decanter), and the church wedding was followed by a long and lively reception at Max's Steakhouse. There was much kidding about our wedding day being interrupted by a locked-room murder, as had happened the day that Sheriff Lens and Vera were married, but happily there was no repetition of that day's events. The sheriff was my best man and Bernice Rosen, Annabel's good friend and client, was the maid of honor.

We stayed overnight at my place, planning to catch the Sunday afternoon train to Washington for our honeymoon. The war news that morning came mostly from the Russian front, where the Soviets had begun a major counteroffensive in the Moscow sector. I'd left the radio on while we packed, and so it was sometime after one o'clock when we heard the news that would change everyone's life. Japanese planes were attacking Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. The nation was at war.

Annabel and I sat listening to the radio for the next half-hour, when we were interrupted by the ringing telephone.

It was Sheriff Lens. "Have you heard the news, Doc?"

"About Pearl Harbor? Yes, we have the radio on."

"Hell of a thing to happen when you're trying to get off on your honeymoon. Washington will probably be a madhouse. Are

you still going?"

"I don't know," I told him, suddenly realizing that Annabel and I had each stopped packing when we heard the news. "I'll call you back."

We spent another half-hour talking it over, listening to the radio reports that kept sounding worse. The Japanese were landing troops in Malaya as well. This was no mistake on the part of some overeager admiral. It was a well-planned attack that had somehow caught us unprepared.

"We'd better postpone the Washington trip," Annabel said at last, voicing the words I'd been reluctant to speak.

"It's our honeymoon."

"There'll be other times, Sam. Our honeymoon is us, together. It doesn't matter where we are."

She was right, of course. I phoned the hotel in Washington to cancel our reservations, then called Sheriff Lens and my nurse April. "Take the week off," she urged, "even if you don't go anywhere."

"We'll see. I may come in later in the week. I just wanted you to know I'm available if there's an emergency."

After that, Annabel phoned her friend and maid of honor, Bernice Rosen. The two chatted for a time about what was happening, about the war that had suddenly been thrust upon us. When she hung up, Annabel told me, "Bernice feels really bad about our delayed honeymoon. She suggests we come out on Tuesday for lunch and then go riding."

Bernice and her brother had a highly profitable horse farm just beyond Spring Glen Cemetery, and as the county's only veterinarian Annabel had been out there many times. She and Bernice were now close friends and Annabel had gone riding with her a few times. I'd been invited along but begged off. I'd never been much of a horseman. At an age when most young men of my era were imagining themselves as cowboys, I was more interested in the yellow Pierce-Arrow Runabout my folks had given me when I graduated from medical school.

But I could hardly turn down an invitation meant as a consolation for our postponed honeymoon. "Sure," I told my wife. "It sounds fine to me."

Bernice Rosen's horse farm covered some two hundred acres backing up to Cobble Mountain and the cemetery. I'd been on Spring Glen's board of trustees for the past few years and I knew that Bernice and others sometimes rode their horses up the mountain trails and into the fringes of the cemetery itself. I could hardly object to it, since I'd once picnicked there in my younger days. On Tuesday, following a delightful lunch with Bernice and her older brother Jack, she suggested we ride up that way. "You're a ceme-

tery trustee, Sam. You should inspect the place from all angles."

"I have enough trouble staying on a horse on level ground."

"Come on, Sam," my wife urged. "I'll see that you don't fall."

I turned to Jack Rosen for support. "Are you coming along, too?"

Jack, a dapper horseman with combed-back blond hair and a slight moustache, smiled and begged off. "Not today, thanks. I want to catch the war news on the radio. My number is coming up soon in the draft lottery. I want to know where I'll be fighting."

President Roosevelt had given a stirring speech to Congress the previous day, following a Japanese attack on Hong Kong and an air raid on Luzon in the Philippines. The United States and Britain had both declared war on Japan, and by Tuesday there were reports that the enemy had captured a small island north of Luzon and an invasion seemed imminent. Wake Island and Shanghai were also under attack. I would have remained with Jack by the radio, but I could see that the women wanted to get away, if only for an hour or two.

Bernice was a small woman, and even with the heels she'd worn at the wedding she only came up to Annabel's chin. Still, in jodhpurs and riding boots, with the usual sporty scarf knotted around her neck, she presented an attractive figure. Once in the saddle she handled her horse Jasper like a rodeo queen. "The war news is terrible," she said as we rode. "Jack's had that radio on for the past two days and I just can't stand listening to it anymore. What's to become of us, Annabel?"

"I don't know," my wife admitted. "So far, at least, we're not at war with Germany and Italy."

"That's only a matter of time," I predicted.

The day was chilly but clear, with some snow predicted overnight. The women headed up the trail toward Cobble Mountain, little more than a large hill, with me bringing up the rear. Geologists had said Cobble Mountain was a large outcropping of granite, not enough for us to challenge New Hampshire's claim as the Granite State, but still impressive. Riding up the trail, I was pleased that Bernice had supplied me with a gentle mare. I was still a bit nervous but trying not to show it in front of Annabel. "Do you ride this way often?" I asked, pulling abreast of them as the trail widened.

"Almost every day when I have time," Bernice answered. Her breath was visible in the cold air, and the horses likewise snorted fumes of condensation. "Sometimes I take the cemetery trail but usually I come this way."

A sudden shadow fell across our path and I glanced skyward to see a large bird dipping its wings to us. "What's that?" I asked, startled by its size. "A buzzard? It must have a six-foot wingspan."

"Looks like a turkey vulture," Annabel said, shading her eyes against the sun to study its flight path. "But they're more a

southern bird."

"We see them around here occasionally," Bernice told us. "Not usually that large, though. That could almost be Bailey's buzzard."

"What's Bailey's buzzard, and who is Bailey?"

Bernice laughed. "Large birds like turkey vultures have been known to grab up living prey if it's small enough and they're hungry enough. Our foreman, Matt Greentree, says he used to see it occasionally when he worked on a ranch out West. One day a really huge buzzard swooped down and grabbed a small dog named Bailey. A cowhand shot at the bird and it dropped its prey. Bailey was all right, but it used to howl every time a big buzzard came circling overhead. They started calling the big ones Bailey's buzzard."

"Are vultures really that aggressive?" I asked.

It was Annabel who answered, as they paused their horses at the top of a rise where the trail split off into two branches. "They say during the Crimean War, after the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade, the vultures were so thick over the battlefield that squads of riflemen had to be posted to protect the wounded."

Rather than take the trail into the cemetery, Bernice led them up a bit further, along a sheer wall of stone, to a place where she could look down on the whole of her horse farm. "It's lovely up here," I admitted. "Thank you for showing us."

"I hope you'll come again soon," Bernice told us as we rode down the hill.

Back at the farm she introduced us to her foreman, Matt Greentree. He shook hands and asked, "Did you see that big bird circling around?"

"I know," Bernice said. "Bailey's buzzard."

"Big enough to carry off a chicken or a small child," he told them with a grin. He was about my age but thinner, with a leathery face that reflected a life lived mainly out of doors.

"Don't be ridiculous, Matt! Here, take our horses."

Back inside, we found Bernice's brother Jack still listening to the radio while he pondered a map of the South Pacific. "The Japanese have occupied Bangkok. They're sweeping across the whole western Pacific."

"Are you going to be drafted?" his sister asked.

"Looks like it."

I could sympathize with him. At forty-five I was beyond the limit for being drafted, and many doctors were getting exemptions anyway. But Jack Rosen was still in his early thirties. "If that happens, Matt and I will have to run the place," Bernice decided. "They wouldn't draft you, would they, Matt?"

Greentree smiled. "Not unless things get a lot worse. I'm forty-three."

Jack turned off the radio. "After a while I just can't take any

more of it. They're worried now about the Japanese attacking our west coast!" He suddenly remembered something. "Oh, the Reverend Dulcimer phoned while you were out, Bern. He's coming by soon to talk to us about some cemetery thing."

Dulcimer, a local minister who was a cemetery trustee along with me, was a student of Spring Glen's history. I well remembered the board meeting when he'd entranced and/or bored us by reading a newspaper description of that summer's day in 1876 when the cemetery had opened to the public for the first time. Umbrellas were raised to protect the town's mayor from a sudden downpour while he read the official proclamation.

I couldn't imagine the purpose of Dulcimer's visit to the Rosens, but we were to find out quite soon. He arrived about twenty minutes later, driving his startling red Studebaker, just as Annabel and I were thinking about departing. Henry Dulcimer was a tall, sturdy man with a booming voice who presented an imposing figure in a church pulpit. Up close, his hair was graying and the lenses of his glasses were growing thicker, but he still moved with the agility of a much younger man.

"Sam," he said, greeting me with a handshake. "Didn't expect to see you here. Thought you'd be on your honeymoon." He gave a nod to Annabel.

"We postponed it because of the war. We might get away briefly over the holidays. What's going on with the cemetery?"

Bernice offered him a chair and he settled into it, fitting easily into our circle of conversation in front of the fireplace. "If I'd have known you were in town, I'd have called you about this, Sam. It's about General Moore's grave. They're talking again about moving his remains to the state capital for a more permanent memorial."

"We approved that a year ago, didn't we?" Moore, a Union general who'd died at Gettysburg, had been buried in a Northmont graveyard long ago, his remains moved to Spring Glen when the present cemetery opened in 1876. He was something of a state hero, though, and no one was really surprised when the governor got around to requesting that the remains be moved. The trustees had approved it and then, in typical fashion, heard nothing further for nearly a year.

"That's right, Sam," Reverend Dulcimer agreed. "But we suddenly got a call yesterday. They want to disinter the body tomorrow morning, and we'd like to take it out by the back entrance, through your property, Bernice and Jack, if you have no objection."

"Why is that necessary?" she wanted to know.

"With all the war news, we hardly need the local press making a spectacle of this. It was reported a year ago and no one objected except that troublemaker Frank Costain. I think we should just move him and be done with it."

"Do you expect trouble from Costain?"

"Who knows what he might do?"

I had to agree with that. Costain was a young hothead who'd become the bane of every elected official in Northmont. Bernice hesitated only a moment before she turned to her brother and said, "It's all right with us, isn't it?"

"Sure," Jack said with a smile. "So long as they don't do anything to frighten the horses."

It seemed like such a simple thing. I automatically said, "I'll come out with you in the morning, Reverend, to make sure all goes well."

Annabel decided she'd be more useful tending to her sick animals at the Ark than taking another day off to watch a body being moved. I met Reverend Dulcimer at the Rosen farm at nine the following morning and the hearse sent from the state capital arrived a short time afterward. I could see Bernice out by the barn with her horses and I waved to her. We led the way up the back road into the cemetery. Happily, Frank Costain was nowhere in sight.

The state had sent a pair of morticians for the general's body and at first I didn't understand why they were needed. When we pulled up to the general's grave site the cemetery crew was already there, having uncovered the old coffin and raised it to the surface. That was when Dulcimer spotted the gleaming mahogany casket in the back of the hearse. "What's that for?" he asked them.

The head one, Wadsworth, explained that money had been appropriated for a new casket, since the original one from the Civil War days would not be appropriate. The morticians were there to transfer the general's remains to the new casket. Dulcimer and I exchanged glances. "What do you think, Sam?"

"I think they should have told us about this earlier. I suppose there's not much we can do about it now, except to ensure that it be accomplished in a dignified manner."

"You see what I mean about the casket," Wadsworth said. "If this is the original one it's almost eighty years old."

I had to agree that it was little more than a pine box, hardly suited to a war hero. We watched while the lid was unscrewed and gently lifted off. I think the sight that greeted our eyes brought a gasp from everyone present.

What we saw before us in the casket's padded interior was not the skeleton of a human being. It appeared instead to be the remains of a very large bird.

When we told them the news back at the Rosen farm, Matt Greentree's first reaction was, "Bailey's buzzard!"

"It certainly looked large enough to have carried off a small dog," I agreed. "But what was it doing in General Moore's coffin?"

That was the mystery, and it seemed beyond solution. There was no university or zoo near Northmont, yet I needed someone with a knowledge of animal anatomy to view the remains. Annabel seemed the likely one for the task, and I telephoned the Ark from the farm. She arrived within a half-hour and accompanied Reverend Dulcimer and me back to the cemetery.

After viewing the bones, she gave her opinion. "It's certainly a large bird of prey. You can tell that by its claws. The remains are in poor condition after all this time, but I would guess it was a vulture or possibly an eagle."

"I don't care about that," the mortician named Wadsworth said. "We need General Moore's remains. Where are they?"

"We'll have to research the cemetery records," I told him. "It may take a few days."

"We can't wait around here. You'll have to call us if you find the correct casket." He started for the hearse, then added with some disdain, "You can keep the bird's bones."

After the hearse pulled away Annabel asked what I was going to do. I shrugged. "The answer may lie in the old cemetery records, but going back to eighteen seventy-six isn't an easy job."

"Why would anyone bury a bird in a coffin? And how did it get to be in General Moore's coffin?"

"We have more questions than answers. Let's see what I turn up in the records."

Annabel headed back to the Ark while Reverend Dulcimer and I instructed the gravediggers to store the casket and bones in the toolshed for now. Then we drove over to the Spring Glen office. On the way he pointed toward the sky. "Look at the size of that one!"

I watched the circling bird, which must have had a wingspan of at least six feet. "Bailey's buzzard," I told him. "Maybe it's not a myth after all."

The two of us spent the rest of the day with the cemetery staff, trying to make something out of the old records, many of them handwritten in a spidery scrawl. "Here's something about the undertaker," Dulcimer said somewhere into the third hour. "He was a very patriotic citizen, used to lead the Fourth of July parades. Name was Frederick Furst. He passed away just a few months before they moved the caskets from the old cemetery to Spring Glen. The procedure is described in some detail. The deceased person's name was chalked on the lid of each casket as it was removed from the grave so there could be no mistake."

"But there was," I pointed out, "unless that bird was placed in the casket at Gettysburg."

"Doubtful. Wouldn't the lightness of it have been noticed at once, in contrast to the heavier coffins?"

We got nowhere, and by the end of the afternoon there was no clue as to what had become of the general's remains.

That night the war news was not good. The Japanese had captured the islands of Guam and landed on Luzon. Annabel told me that Bernice had invited her to go riding again on Thursday. She decided her assistant could handle things at the Ark. I was invited, too, but I wasn't prepared for my second encounter with a horse in three days.

We awoke Thursday to find about an inch of snow on the ground. It certainly wasn't surprising for December eleventh in New England, but Annabel phoned Bernice to verify that the horseback ride was still on. I went to my office and April told me Reverend Dulcimer had called. He was still looking through the old cemetery files but had found nothing helpful. Neither of us could believe that a man as patriotic as Frederick Furst would have stolen General Moore's remains and substituted a dead bird, yet no other explanation seemed likely. I wasn't about to entertain the notion that the general had somehow turned into a bird after death.

I stopped in to see a couple of my hospital patients, both of whom expressed regret that the start of the war had postponed our honeymoon plans. But many patients still thought I was away, and by noon April told me, "The afternoon is free. Why don't you and Annabel go off somewhere?"

"She's out riding with Bernice. I might take a ride out to the farm and meet them."

The temperature was hovering around thirty and none of the morning's snow had melted. I drove out to the Rosen horse farm and found Bernice's brother Jack cleaning out the stable. "They're still out riding," he told me. "I expected them back before this."

Matt Greentree came out of the house to join us. "Just listening to the war news," he said. "Nothing new."

"Give me a hand with this muck, Matt," Jack said. "We have to get the place cleaned out or my sister will have a fit."

I turned to look up toward Cobble Mountain, searching for riders, and saw a small car coming our way down the road. It wasn't Annabel or Bernice, but Frank Costain. I didn't like the idea of him snooping around the cemetery, and he certainly didn't belong on the Rosen private road. Costain was younger than me by about ten years, but he seemed to feel he was better qualified than people like Reverend Dulcimer and me to be a cemetery trustee.

"I don't want trouble, Frank," I began, but he interrupted before I could finish.

"Get in the car, Doc. Your wife needs you."

I felt a sudden jolt of panic. "What happened?"

"Annabel's all right. It's Bernice. She's disappeared."

Greentree had followed me over to the car, leaving Jack in the stable. "Bernice may be in some trouble," I told him. "This is Frank

Costain, Matt Greentree."

The foreman pulled off his work glove and offered a red, chafed hand to Costain. "Pleased to meet you."

"Maybe you'd both better come along," he suggested. "We'll need people to search."

We decided not to alarm Bernice's brother by telling him what had happened. When we'd both slid into the car, I asked, "What happened?"

"I don't exactly know. I heard a rumor that you'd removed General Moore's body yesterday and I was driving through to see if his grave had been disturbed. Up this end on the back road I encountered your wife on horseback. There was a riderless horse trailing behind. She told me Bernice Rosen had disappeared. I suppose she must have fallen off her horse but there was no sign of her. That's when she suggested I drive down here for help."

Despite my dislike for the fellow, he seemed to be telling a straight story. By the time we'd reached the spot where the trail branched off from the back road, Annabel had ridden down to meet us. I hurried from the car and ran to meet her. "What happened to Bernice?"

Her face was drained of blood. I'd never seen her look so terrible. "Sam, she's gone! I can't—"

I took her in my arms. "Tell me everything that happened."

"That's just it! Nothing happened. We were riding up the path on Cobble Mountain. I was in the lead and she was about two or three lengths behind. Those big buzzards were flying around."

"Near you?"

"Well, they weren't close enough to frighten us. I heard a noise, a sort of gasp, from behind me, but I didn't look around right away. After maybe thirty seconds, when she was silent, I called her name. She didn't answer and I—I looked back. Jasper's saddle was empty. She just wasn't there!"

"She'd fallen off."

"That was my first thought, of course, but the coating of snow was unmarked except for our hoof prints. I could see down the trail about a hundred feet or more." She gave a terrible sob. "She was nowhere, Sam! It was as if one of those giant buzzards swooped down and lifted her from the saddle."

"I'm sure that didn't happen." I turned to Greentree and Costain. "I'll go with Annabel. You two start searching the other trails."

We led the two horses back up the trail, examining the hoof marks as we went. Annabel had steered the horses to the outer edge of the path on their return, so the line of tracks going up was undisturbed. My wife's horse had a gouge in one shoe so it was easy to tell the tracks apart. On one side of the trail was the sheer granite wall stretching up more than twenty feet, without handholds or vegetation. On the other side, the hill sloped down

through bushes and underbrush. There was no sign that Bernice had dismounted in the snow, and she could not have leaped from her horse onto the granite wall. The wet snow had clung to the bushes on the other side, and these, too, were undisturbed.

"Sam, what happened to her?" Annabel asked plaintively.

"I don't know. Look, you'd better ride back to the farm and tell her brother what's happened. Then phone Sheriff Lens and tell him to get up here."

"You think it's something bad."

"No, I just want him here." Mainly, I didn't want Annabel there if we did find something bad.

I watched her ride back down the trail and then followed Costain's and Greentree's footprints up the other trail. They'd headed for the top of the granite wall, which seemed logical enough, but when I reached the top there was nothing to see. The light breeze had kept the snow from collecting there, and most of it was bare. I walked to the edge and peered down at the trail below. It was a bird's-eye view, and perhaps for a moment I imagined myself as that giant buzzard circling overhead, locking my eyes on the two women.

I considered the possibility but immediately rejected it. Bernice Rosen was a small woman, but she had to weigh a hundred pounds or more. No bird I knew could lift that much weight and fly away with it, not even Bailey's buzzard. And even if something like that had happened, wouldn't she have yelled to Annabel for help?

These thoughts were interrupted by some shouts from the other side of the granite ledge. I walked over, finally seeing their footprints, and started down through a tangle of underbrush. Below me I could make out Frank Costain's red jacket as he stood beside Greentree. "Down here, Doc," he called when he saw me starting my descent. "Be careful!"

Here and there were patches of snow that seemed disturbed by someone falling or sliding down the incline. I started to slip myself but they caught me at the bottom. "What did you find?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"She's here," Greentree said quietly, pointing a bit farther down the hill. Then I saw her. It appeared that her body had rolled or fallen down, finally coming to a stop against a bush. I knelt in the snow and felt for a pulse but there was none. Her face and arms were covered with scratch marks, some of them deep, but there was very little blood. I undid the kerchief from around her throat.

"Is she dead?" Costain asked.

"I'm afraid so. It looks like a broken neck but I can't be sure."

I was reluctant to move Bernice's body until Sheriff Lens had seen it. By the time we walked back to the car and drove down to the farm, he'd arrived. "What is it, Doc?" he asked immediately, seeing

my grim expression.

"Bernice Rosen has been killed. We don't know how. I can take you up to the body. First I'd better see Annabel."

She knew it, of course, as soon as she saw my face. "My God, Sam, she was my maid of honor just five days ago!"

"I know. I feel terrible." I told her how they'd found the body in the underbrush on the other side of the hill.

"There were no footprints, nothing!" She just kept shaking her head.

"I'm going back up there with Sheriff Lens."

"I want to go too!"

"No!" I said firmly. "Stay here with Jack. He'll need comforting."

The sheriff and I took my car and retraced the route up the hill. "What a day it's been, Doc, between this and the war."

"What happened? I haven't been listening."

"Germany and Italy declared war on us this morning, and at twelve-thirty Roosevelt asked Congress for an immediate declaration of war against them."

I took a deep breath. "It's another world war, if it wasn't already."

"It'll be a long one, Doc, with two fronts for us to fight on."

"A lot of young men will be going. A lot of them won't be coming back."

I drove as close as I could to the body's location, and the sheriff and I walked from there. I told him Annabel's story, and what little we'd found. He studied the body from several angles. "You think it was an accident, Doc?"

"It might have been."

"But how could it have happened?"

"Something must have lifted her from the saddle and dropped her here. I read a story once as a boy, I think in *The Strand Magazine,* about a man who was snatched up while riding a horse along a snowy path. In the story the man had been accidentally snagged by the grappling hook of a passing hot-air balloon and lifted into the sky. When his coat tore and released him he fell to earth and was killed."

"I think a hot-air balloon would have been at least as noticeable as a giant bird, Doc."

"I know. This wasn't a balloon."

"Could there have been some sort of booby trap or snare on the trail, put there by hunters?"

"You're forgetting Annabel was on the lead horse. If it was anything like that, it would have gotten her first. The scratches on Bernice's face and clothing certainly suggest a bird or some other creature, but I can't bring myself to believe it."

We returned to the farm and the sheriff made arrangements for the body to be removed. "I've instructed my deputies to take some

pictures first, as possible evidence. Now I'd better get a statement from Annabel."

By the time we returned home late that afternoon, my wife and I both felt emotionally drained. The death of Bernice Rosen, however it occurred, had been a terrible event for Annabel. But I was totally unprepared for the effect it had.

She poured herself a drink and turned to me. "Sam, do you think you might have been responsible in any way for Bernice's death?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you see? It's one of your impossible crimes, isn't it? Did someone kill her simply to challenge you? Was her life sacrificed to prove that you're not so smart as you think you are?"

"There's madness in an idea like that. Believe me, if she was murdered it was by a person with a logical motive."

"But she had no enemies! There was no ex-husband or even a boyfriend lurking around, so far as we know."

"It's what people don't know that often leads to murder. Whatever it was, it had nothing to do with me."

She shook her head, close to tears. "If I thought our whole life together was going to be like this—"

"It won't be! If I discovered that my crime-solving had anything to do with Bernice's death, I'd give it up. I'd close my practice and we could move to Boston."

She brushed the tears from her eyes and tried to smile. "What about the Ark? I couldn't give that up."

I took her in my arms. "Annabel, this isn't like you."

"I never had a close friend murdered before, almost before my eyes."

"I promise I'll find the killer, if there is one. And I'll find the motive, too."

The war news grew more serious by the day. The Japanese had attempted a landing on Wake Island and been beaten off, but the American force there was small and couldn't hold out for long. In Washington, the draft was picking up steam and the terms of all draftees had been extended to six months after the end of the war. I realized that Northmont could soon be a town without young men. A few exemptions were being granted for farmers growing essential crops, but many who hadn't been drafted in the selective-service lottery were hurrying off to enlist.

On Friday morning I met with Sheriff Lens at his office. "Is there anything new on Bernice's death?"

"Autopsy report. Her neck was broken and there was also evidence of strangulation."

"Strangulation? I saw no marks on her throat."

"You told me you'd removed a kerchief she was wearing around

her neck. That might have protected the skin from abrasions."

I puzzled over it. "Buzzards don't strangle people, no matter how big they are."

"You never really thought it was a bird, did you, Doc?"

"No. It's just that there have been so many bird images involved in this—the story of Bailey's buzzard, the skeleton in General Moore's casket, the big turkey vultures we've seen overhead."

"Maybe if we knew what happened to the general's body we'd know what happened to Bernice Rosen."

"No," I said slowly, "the two things were never really related." I stood up and put on my coat. Outside the snow flurries had started again. "I guess I'll go back to the cemetery."

Reverend Dulcimer was at the cemetery office, still pondering the old handwritten records. "They called from the state capital this morning, Sam. They want to know what we're doing to locate General Moore's remains."

"I've got an idea about that," I told him. "Do you have that list of the bodies moved from the old cemetery?"

"Right here. You're better at reading the handwriting than I am."

There was one entry I remembered seeing, a young nephew of the undertaker Frederick Furst. No description was given of the individual caskets, but I was willing to bet this one was a twin of General Moore's. "He's in here," I said with conviction, pointing to the grave number. "Let's open it up."

We got a pair of gravediggers and set to work. More than an hour later the coffin in question was raised to the surface. As soon as they unscrewed the lid I knew I'd been right. The remains inside were clad in the tattered remnants of a Union officer's uniform.

"How did you know?" Dulcimer asked me.

"It all had to be connected somehow with Furst himself. The large bird wasn't a vulture. I believe it was a bald eagle, the symbol of our country. Though I don't think it was illegal to kill them way back then, a man as patriotic as Frederick Furst would have been horrified if he accidentally shot one. So horrified, in fact, that he might have buried it in a casket and listed a fictitious child's name on the grave."

"But how could the caskets have been confused?"

"Furst himself was already dead by that time, remember. The name of the deceased was chalked onto the top of each casket as it was removed from the ground, but what happened then?"

"They were loaded on wagons and taken here, to Spring Glen."

"Correct! And we know from contemporary accounts that the town's mayor had to dedicate the new cemetery with umbrellas held overhead to shelter him from the rain. Don't you see it? The rain washed away the chalk marks on the coffin lids! Furst's dead

eagle became a Civil War general because somebody guessed wrong. After fifteen years, no one would have thought twice about the general's coffin being lighter than expected."

"Then it had nothing to do with what happened to Bernice?"

"Not a thing. But I think I know who killed her and how and why."

"Did the weather report tell you that, too?"

"No," I replied, "but the war news did."

Reverend Dulcimer decided to come with me to the Rosen farm. I was glad to have him along. Despite a certain sense of triumph, this was the part I really hated. Any of us could have been a killer, given a different life, different circumstances. In this case, the sheer brutality of Bernice's killing could not be allowed to go unpunished.

Jack Rosen was at the kitchen table when we arrived. He looked up and gave me a sad smile. "I'm just completing the arrangements for Bernice's funeral. She'll be laid out tomorrow and Sunday, with the service on Monday. I'm burying her at Spring Glen, of course. It was such a part of her life, riding those trails."

"Is Matt around?"

"He's in the stable."

I found Greentree out with the horses, using a pitchfork to deliver fresh hay to the stalls. "How are you, Matt?"

"Okay, Doc," he said, continuing with his work.

"I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?"

"Why'd you kill Bernice? Was it just to get control of the farm?"

He turned and smiled, and without a word plunged his pitchfork into my chest.

Later that day I was a patient at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital myself, something I'd never imagined happening. Annabel and my nurse April were at my bedside, tending to me like a pair of ministering angels. "You've got a nice row of four punctures right across your chest," April informed me. "Luckily they're only a couple of inches deep."

"This is a great way to be spending my honeymoon!" I groaned.

"You'll live," Annabel said with a smile, trying to make light of it.

Sheriff Lens came in then. "What in hell did you say to that guy, Doc, to set him off like that?"

"Just that I knew he'd killed Bernice. Did you get him?"

He nodded. "He grabbed a horse after he forked you. He was halfway to Shinn Corners before my deputies caught up with him. He took a shot in the leg before he surrendered. You'd better tell me all about it, Doc. I'm still in the dark."

"It was the war news. When I drove up to the farm yesterday he came out of the house and said he'd been listening to the war

news, that there was nothing new. But there was something new yesterday morning, the biggest news since Sunday's Pearl Harbor attack. Germany and Italy had declared war on us, and the President asked for a declaration of war at twelve-thirty. I didn't leave my office for the farm until noon. If Greentree really had been listening to the radio he'd have known about this before I arrived. When I remembered this, I asked myself where he'd been just before I got there, and why he'd lied about it. There was only one likely explanation. He'd been up on the mountain killing Bernice."

"How'd he do that?"

"He knew what route Bernice preferred, and he headed them off, going to the top of that granite slab where the breeze had mostly blown the snow away. Bernice was riding behind you, Annabel, as he'd guessed she would be. As she passed beneath him, he lassoed her around the neck and dragged her up out of the saddle. She was helpless to even scream. The force of it broke her neck and choked her to death, but that kerchief around her neck kept the rope marks from showing."

"We need some evidence of that, Doc."

"I can give you a couple of things. Greentree had worked on a ranch out West, where he no doubt became proficient with a lariat. And when Frank Costain rode down to tell us of Bernice's disappearance, I introduced them. Greentree took off his work glove to shake hands and I couldn't help noticing how red and chafed his hand was, no doubt from yanking a rope with a hundred-pound body on the end.

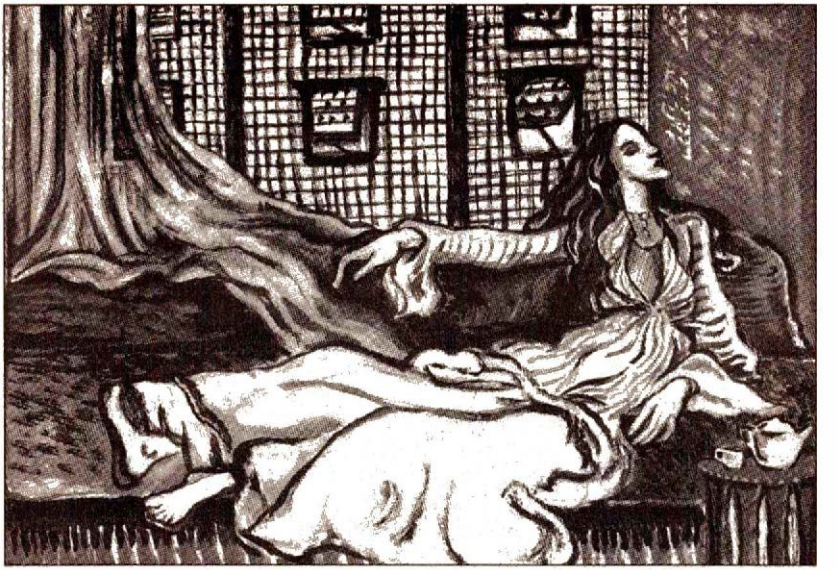
"Once she was dead, he scratched up her face and clothes to further the buzzard legend and rolled her body into the underbrush. He rode back to the farm by a different trail, avoiding the spot where Annabel was searching in vain for Bernice. When we came back later to search, he made sure to take Costain up to the granite top, trampling any hoof or footprints he might have missed earlier. Of course Greentree was the one with the buzzard stories. Even if we didn't believe them he wanted to plant the possibility in our minds to keep us away from the truth."

"How could he have done such a terrible thing?" my wife asked.

"I think he wanted the horse farm. He knew Jack had a low selective-service number and would be drafted very soon. With Bernice dead he'd be running things, even if he didn't own the place. Jack might even be killed in the war and never come home. He could do what he wanted with the horses and make himself a tidy profit."

Later, when Annabel and I were alone in the hospital room, she asked, "Are you still going to be a detective, Sam? Didn't you learn anything today?"

"Two things. Don't believe in giant buzzards, and never accuse a man of murder when he's holding a pitchfork." ●



Art by June Levine

THE EGYPTIAN GARDEN

by Marjorie Eccles

"But what has happened to the garden?" asked Mrs. Palmer.

"There doesn't appear to be one, I'm afraid, dear," replied Moira Ledgerwood, who felt obliged to take the old lady under her wing, as she'd frequently let it be known over the last two weeks. "Just a big courtyard."

"Well, I can see that!"

"No garden in Cairo housses," the guide, Hassan, asserted sibilantly, with the fine disregard for truth which had characterised all his explanations so far.

"But there used to be one here. With a fountain in the middle."

Hassan shrugged. The other twenty members of the cultural tour smiled tolerantly. They were accustomed to Mrs. Palmer by now, after ten days together in Upper Egypt. You had to admire her spirit, and the way she kept up with the best of them, despite her age. A widow, refusing to let the fact that she was alone limit her choice of holiday to Eastbourne, or perhaps a Mediterranean cruise. Intrepid old girl, eighty if she was a day. They were always the toughest, that sort. But her younger travelling companions

sensed that this trip had turned out to be something of a disappointment. Egypt was apparently not living up to expectations, it wasn't as it had been when she'd lived here, though that would have been asking a lot, since it had been in the Dark Ages, before the war.

"Taking a trip down memory lane, then, are you, Ursula, is that why you've come?" Moira had asked kindly when Mrs. Palmer had let slip this fact on the first day, utterly dismayed at the tarmac road that now ran towards the once remote, silent, and awesome Valley of the Kings, at the noisome phalanxes of waiting coaches with their engines kept running for the air conditioning, the throngs of people from the cruise ships queuing up for tickets to visit the tombs of the Pharaohs, which were lit by electric light. Before the war, when her husband had taken her to view the antiquities, they had sailed across the Nile in a felucca from Luxor, and traversed the rocky descent and on to the Valley of the Queens and the Temple of Hatshepsut by donkey, accompanied only by a dragoman. The silence had been complete. Now, they might just as well be visiting a theme park, she said tartly.

"They're a poor people. The tourist industry's important to them, Ursula," Moira reminded her gently.

Mrs. Palmer had so far managed to bear Moira's goodness with admirable fortitude, but she was beginning to be afraid it might not last.

Strangers ten days ago, the tour group were on Christian name terms within a few hours, something it had taken Mrs. Palmer a little time to get used to. But nothing fazed her for long, not even the touts who pestered with their tatty souvenirs, and craftily pressed worthless little scarabs into your palm, or even slipped them into your pocket, and then held out their own palms for payment. Moira had asked her advice on what to say to get rid of them, but when she repeated what Mrs. Palmer had told her: *"Imshi! Mefish filouse!"* the touts had doubled up with laughter and Moira had been afraid that Ursula had been rather unkind and led her to say something indelicate. Ursula, however, said no, it was only the prospect of a middle-aged English lady using Ara-

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bic, telling them to go away because she had no money that amused them, when they knew that all such ladies were rich, and only addressed the natives, loudly, in English. But then, they were easily amused—childlike, kindly people who were nevertheless rogues to a man.

The group advanced through the courtyard and made an orderly queue at the door of the tall old Mameluke house near the bazaar, now a small privately owned museum with a cafe for light refreshments on the ground floor, buying their tickets from the doorkeeper, an enormously fat, grizzled old man who wore a sparkling white *galabiya* and smiled charmingly at them with perfect teeth. He kept his eye on Mrs. Palmer, gradually losing his smile as she lagged behind. He noticed her casting quick glances over her shoulder at the benches set in the raised alcove of perforated stonework, at the many doors opening off the large dusty inner courtyard, which itself held nothing but a couple of dilapidated pots haphazardly filled with a few dispirited, un-English looking flowers. But after a while she turned and resolutely followed the rest of the party.

Inside the house, little had changed, except that it had been recently restored, and consequently looked a little too good to be true. Wide panelled wooden doors, wrought iron, and coloured glass hanging lamps depending from ceilings elaborately carved with geometric designs; inlaid furniture and wide couches in balconies that jutted out over the once poverty-stricken squalor of the narrow street below. Mrs. Palmer was so overcome she was obliged to rest on one of these couches to try and catch a breath of air through the carved trellis screening, leaving the rest of the group to be shown around the house. She had no need to go with them, she knew every corner and every item in it, intimately. She had lived here once, she had been the mistress of this house.

And there had been a garden here. She had made it.

Impossible to count the number of times she'd sat here behind the *mushrabiyeh* latticework, a device originally intended to screen women of the seraglio from passersby. Listening to the traffic that never stopped, the blaring horns, police whistles, the muezzins' calls to prayer, the shouts and sounds from the bazaar, to Cairo's never-ceasing noise, noise, noise! Longing for the soft, earthy smell of an English spring, to hear a blackbird or the call of the cuckoo, and the whisper of rain on the roof.

"Rain? What rain?" her husband had repeated when he had brought her here from England as a bride, dewy-fresh, hopeful, and twenty years old. "It never rains." She had assumed he was exaggerating, but she quickly realised it was almost the literal truth. He rarely spoke anything else.

In the short time since her wedding, she had already begun to wonder, too late, if her marriage had perhaps not been overhasty. Such a good catch, James Palmer had seemed, courteous, well-connected—and well-off, something that Ursula had been taught was of paramount importance in a husband. She knew now that he was essentially cold and reserved, and humourless, too. He was tall and thin, handsome enough, and his only disadvantage, it had seemed to Ursula, was an Adam's apple which seemed to have a life of its own. She had decided she could learn to ignore that disconcerting lump of cartilage, and also the fact that he was twenty years older than she. His lack of warmth and humour, his pomposity, however, was something she didn't think she would ever get used to.

As time went on, longing for the smiles and laughter that had hitherto been a natural part of her life, she began to throw herself into the pursuit of amusement, easy enough to find in the cosmopolitan Cairo of those days. It was 1938. Somewhere, beyond Egypt, the world was preparing for war, but here expatriate European society carried on as though it would go away if they ignored the possibility. Her time was filled with countless dinner parties, afternoon tea at Shepheard's, gossip, charity functions, tennis parties if the weather was supportable. When James was away, there was always someone to escort her, to take her dancing and dining every night.

But fun of this sort turned out to be an ephemeral gratification. For a while, she had believed such frenetic activity could obliterate the loneliness and dissatisfaction with her married state, but it very soon palled. Increasingly, when James was away and she was left entirely to herself, a pensive melancholy fell on her. As an oriental-export merchant, eldest son of his family business, he travelled all over the Middle East in search of carpets, carved wooden furniture, alabaster, and metalwork to ship to England, and it had pleased him to furnish this old house he had bought with the best of what he had found, so that one had to accustom oneself to reclining on couches and eating off low tables, as if one were a woman in a harem. Indeed, her disappointment with the life she had let herself in for made Ursula reflect ironically that James might have been better pleased if she had been.

Spending most of her time listlessly in this very room, which was open entirely to the air on one side, drinking thick Egyptian coffee or mint tea, longing for Earl Grey, which could be bought if one knew where to look, but never, for some mysterious reason, in sufficient quantities, she had gazed over the balustrade to the barren expanse of sandy earth around the edges of the courtyard, the drifts of dust obscuring the lovely colours of the tiles, wondering if this was all life had to offer. Not even a sign of a child as yet,

though her mother, in her weekly letters, constantly assured her there was plenty of time.

Time, it seemed, stood still, an hour as long as a day. A huge expanse of space, and inside its infinity she sat alone, while the friendly chatter and laughter—and noisy, if short-lived, quarrelling—sounded above the continuous wailing Arab radio music that issued from the kitchen quarters and made her feel more alone than ever. What was she to do? Nothing, it seemed, but assume a stiff upper lip and get on with accustoming herself to the inescapable facts of her new life. The food, for one thing: the tough, unidentified meat she was tempted to think might once have been a camel, the sugary cakes that set her teeth on edge, and the unleavened bread. She must get used to the heavily chlorinated water that James insisted upon, too. The flies. The beautifully ironed napkins, so fresh from the *dhobi* that they were still damp. And especially to the *khamsin* that blew from the southwest, hot and dusty, giving her a nasty, tickling cough that wouldn't go away. Oh, that eternal dust and grit that insinuated itself everywhere!

When she first arrived, she'd been determined to emulate her mother and maintain an orderly English household, with the dust outside, where it belonged, but she was defeated. In their attempts to clean, the servants insisted on using whisks, whose only effect was to distribute the dirt from one place to another. The grit ground itself into the beautiful mosaic floor tiles and the silky carpets under your feet. The cushions gave off puffs of dust whenever you sat on them. Even simple tidiness was beyond her capacity to convey to them, and theirs to accept. Elbow grease was a substance as entirely unknown as the Mansion Polish and Brasso she ordered from home. Gradually, despite all her natural inclinations and her mother's training, inertia overcame her and she began to think: What does it matter, why fight the inevitable? Perhaps the servants were right, perhaps it was as Allah willed, *inshallah*.

Even more did she feel that now, sixty years later, when ghosts, and her own perceptions of violent death, were everywhere.

Sometimes, for air, she used to sit in the cool of the evening on the flat roof of the house, overlooking the expanse of the lighted city, watching the achingly beautiful sunsets over the Nile, with the ineffably foreign domes and minarets of the mosques piercing the skyline, as the darkness mercifully masked the seething squalor of the ancient, dun-coloured city. There was an especially low point on one particular night, when she almost considered throwing herself off, or alternatively taking to the bottle, but she was made of sterner stuff and didn't really take either proposition seriously. Instead, when it eventually became too cold for comfort, she took herself down the stairs to her usual position overlooking

the courtyard, where she faced the fact that, unless she did something about it, her life would dry up as surely as the brittle leaves on the single palm that gave shade to the dusty square below, that she might as well take to the *chador* and veil. Despite the lateness of the hour, she went outside and, picking her way over the rubbish that seemed to arrive by osmosis, stared at the gritty, trampled earth and thought of her father's hollyhocks and lupins and night-scented stock.

"Of course the courtyard's dark," James said when she later began by mentioning, tentatively, how the walls seemed to close in on her. "That's its purpose. Oriental houses are traditionally built around the concept of high walls providing shade. The natives like nothing more than to live outdoors whenever they can, and the shade makes it bearable."

"No one lives outdoors in this establishment," Ursula pointed out.

"We are not natives, Ursula. And while we're on the subject, it's not a good thing to get too friendly with the servants. They'll lose all respect for you."

It wasn't the first time she'd been tempted to laugh at his pomposity, but knew that would have been a mistake. She didn't laugh now, she was only half listening, anyway, absorbed by her new idea. She didn't bother to point out that the only friend she had in the house was Nawal, the one female amongst all the other servants who, as one of Yusuf the cook's extended family, had been brought in to work for her. At first sulky and uncooperative, she had gradually accepted Ursula's friendly overtures. Now she was all wide Egyptian smiles and good humour; she delighted in looking after Ursula, making her bed, taking care of her silk underclothes, and being allowed to brush her mane of thick, red-gold hair. She brought magical, if foul-tasting, syrup for Ursula's cough when it became troublesome and had become fiercely protective of her, pitying her, so far from home and with no family around her, no one except that cold and distant husband.

The next day Ursula obtained—with difficulty—a spade, a garden fork, and a hoe, took them into the courtyard, and began to dig the hard, flattened earth around the edges of the tiles, where surely there had once been plants and trees growing—and would be again, after she'd arranged for a delivery of rich alluvial soil from the banks of the Nile, in which anything grew.

James predictably disapproved strongly when he'd got over his first disbelief at this crazy notion of actually tackling the making of a garden, alone. It was unnecessary. She could occupy herself more profitably elsewhere. Why not take up sketching, or Byzantine art, his own particular passion? But Ursula's inclinations didn't lie either way; she couldn't draw for toffee, and she found

Byzantine art far too stylised to be either comprehensible or interesting. For once her stubbornness overcame his disapproval. Very well, he said reluctantly, but had she considered how such eccentricity would reflect on him in the eyes of their European acquaintances? They needn't know, said Ursula. And neither was it, he could not resist reminding her yet again, ignoring her interjection, something calculated to enhance her authority with the servants.

And of course, he was right about this last, as he always contrived to be. They came out in full force to see what she was doing and laughed behind their hands at the prospect of an English lady wielding a spade, even sometimes going down on her knees, getting her hands filthy, grubbing in the earth for all the world like one of the *fellaheen*. She didn't care, but was nevertheless a little discouraged. Digging in the heat was harder work than she'd anticipated, and meant she could only do it for short periods. It did not seem as though her garden would progress very fast.

On the third day, she saw the boy watching her. He watched her for a week. She didn't know who he was, why he was here, how he'd arrived. If she spoke to him, or even smiled, he melted away. He appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen, slim and tall, liquid-eyed, with curly black hair and skin as smooth as brown alabaster. A beautiful youth in a *galabiya* white as driven snow, with a profile straight off a temple wall.

"Who is he?" she asked Yusuf, at last.

"He Khaled," Yusuf said dismissively, and Ursula, intimidated, asked no more questions. She wondered if Khaled were dumb, or perhaps not entirely in his right mind, but dismissed this last, recalling the bright intelligence in his face.

The first time he spoke to her was early one morning, when he said shyly, "I deegéd the kennel for you." His face was anxious.

Kennel?

Following his pointing finger, she saw that the first of the series of blocked irrigation channels, which led from the source of the fountain, had been cleared. He had anticipated her intention to clear the conduits so that she could draw water for her thirsty new plants. She smiled. He smiled back, radiantly. He took up the spade and began on the next one.

Miraculously, he persuaded the fountain to work. Water began to jet into the basin again, and at once the courtyard was transformed with possibilities: colour and scent, visions of lilies and lavender, marguerites, blue delphiniums and phlox in white and pink swam about in her head. Roses, roses, roses. She saw her dream of a lush and opulent garden coming true at last, the tiles clean and swept and glowing with colour, with the reflection of light and shade dappling through the leaves onto the dark walls,

under the burning blue sky, the cool, musical playing of the water into the basin.

He came most days after that to help her, unselfconsciously tucking his *galabiya* up between his legs. She discovered he had a sly wit, and they laughed together, sharing their youth as well as the work—she was not, after all, so many years older than he. He sensed quickly what she wanted done, but shook his head when she showed him the plant catalogues her mother, overenthusiastically, had sent from England. Roses, yes, Khaled made her understand—his English was picturesque but adequate as a means of communication, and he learned quickly—roses would flourish. Were not the first roses bred in Persia? But lupins, hollyhocks, phlox—no. She thought it might be worth a try, however, if she reversed the seasons, pretended the Egyptian winter was an English summer, then for the fierce summer heat planted canna lilies and bougainvillea, strelitzia, perfumed mimosa, jacaranda and jasmine, oleander . . . The names were like an aphrodisiac.

She arranged, mistakenly as it turned out, to pay Khaled for his work, and though it seemed to her pitifully little, after some hesitation he accepted gravely, while making her understand he would have done it for nothing. "It help pay my bookses," he said ingenuously.

Nawal, with a blush and a giggle and a lowering of her eyes whenever she spoke of Khaled, had told Ursula that he was hoping to attend the university of Al Azhar, to study architecture, in order someday to build good, clean houses for poor people, both of which ambitions his uncle, Yusuf, regarded as being impossible and above his station. Nor was Yusuf, it seemed, pleased with her arrangement to pay the boy. Shouting issued from the domestic quarters shortly after she had made him the offer. When she asked Nawal what was the matter, Ursula was told that Yusuf, while able to shut his eyes to the help Khaled gave freely, could not entertain the idea of his accepting payment for it. The noise of the altercation in the kitchen was so great it brought James from the house's upper fastness, where he immured himself whenever he was at home. After a few incisive words from him, an abnormal quietness was restored. He then turned to deal with Ursula.

"When will you learn?" he shouted, marching out into the courtyard, his face red with anger, his Adam's apple wobbling uncontrollably, his patience at an end. "Don't you see that paying him money, when he freely offered his services, is tantamount to an insult? You will abandon this ridiculous project at once, *do you understand?* No wonder the servants look down on you, working out here like a peasant! If you want a garden so much, I can have one made for you, dammit! There's no need to make such an exhibition of yourself!"

"No! You've missed the point, that isn't what I want at all!" Now that she had found her raison d'être, something that gave meaning to the enforced idleness and aridity of her life in Egypt, Ursula was in a panic at the thought of losing it.

Khaled had followed them outside. He had endured Yusuf's shouting with equanimity but when James turned on Ursula, those liquid eyes of his flashed, simply flashed. He plucked out the garden fork that was driven into the earth nearby and for a terrified moment she thought . . . But he merely dashed it to the ground with a dramatic gesture worthy of the wrath of God. Before anyone could say anything, after another murderous look, he was gone.

And that's the last I'll see of him, Ursula thought sadly.

She had no prescience then of the dark future, otherwise she would have left, too, taken the next available ship. Left Egypt then and there and gone back to England, as James had been urging her to do for some time, in view of the ever-increasing talk of war in Europe. But that would have been admitting failure, and a certain innate stubbornness was keeping her here, a refusal to admit defeat. A tacit awareness by now had arisen between herself and her husband that their marriage was not a success, but divorce in those days was not to be contemplated lightly. Paramount was the scandal, as far as James was concerned. As for Ursula, it would have felt as though she were being sent home in disgrace, like a child, for not being good, which she knew was unfair. She had been too young for what she'd had to face, and her marriage had been a foolish leap in the dark, but no one had attempted to warn her.

Although James simply would not, or could not, understand, Ursula was not going to abandon her project at this stage. He could not *make* her give it up. The garden had become an obsession. Ignoring his disapproval, she worked every day, until the perspiration poured off her and her thick hair became lank as wet string, until the sun or the *khamsin* drove her indoors. Sometimes she was so hot she took off her hat in defiance of the sun and her fair skin got burnt. Her English rose looks faded and she was in danger of becoming permanently desiccated and dried, as English women do, under the sun. It was obvious that James was beginning to find her less than attractive. But her garden was starting to take shape.

She had been wrong about Khaled. Eventually, without explanation, he returned. Nothing was said, he simply took up where he had left off. Ursula bought him books and gave them to him as presents, so that honour was satisfied. James, surprisingly, said nothing. Perhaps he hoped the garden would be completed all the more quickly and Ursula would regain her sanity. Then one day, he announced, "I've found a live-in companion for you."

"What?" She was so furious she could scarcely speak, in a panic,

imagining a stringy old lady who would torment her with demands to play two-handed patience, and prevent her from gardening. How could he do this to her?

But the stringy old lady turned out to be a bouncy and athletic young woman not much older than Ursula, called Bunty Cashmore. Three months out of England, with short, dark, curly hair, hockey player's legs, and a healthily tanned complexion enhanced by the fierce Egyptian sun rather than ruined by it, as Ursula's was. And then she understood the reason for James's sudden concern for her friendless state.

Rather than regarding the brisk bossiness of her new companion as a threat to his own authority, he seemed amused by it, and showed not a trace of disapproval of her, or impatience with her meaningless chatter. In fact, he paid more attention to her than to Ursula, no matter that she showed enthusiasm for the garden project. But then, Bunty was enthusiastic about everything, most especially when it came to learning something of Byzantine art, about which she cheerfully admitted she was ignorant.

She knew nothing about gardening, either, but it didn't prevent her from interfering—or pitching in, as she cheerfully put it. She pulled up tiny, cherished seedlings, believing them to be weeds. Oops, sorry! Surveying the garden through its haze of dust, which was hosed off each night when the garden was watered, she informed Ursula that she needed bedding plants to provide more colour in the courtyard, that the yucca in the corner, chosen for its architectural form, was ugly, and should go. She suggested that "the boy" was no longer needed, either, now that she was here to help Ursula, now that the garden was at last almost finished, apart from the very last strip of bare earth which Ursula was reluctant to deal with, since that would leave little else to do but tend the garden while waiting for it to mature.

Khaled bent over his work at hearing what was proposed for him, hiding his thoughts and the resentment in his eyes.

And Nawal, meanwhile, noted every look that passed between Bunty and James, enraged on behalf of her mistress, fiercely jealous of the time Ursula was now forced to spend with the usurper, Bunty.

As for Ursula herself, she gritted her teeth at Bunty's insensitivity and refused to let her get on her nerves, hoping that all she had to do was wait, and the untenable situation going on in her own house would resolve itself. For England had declared war on Germany in September 1939, and Bunty was forever talking of going back home and becoming a WAAF. Ursula, entirely sick of her, couldn't wait. Yet talk, it seemed, was all it was. Something held Bunty here, presumably in the person of James Palmer: She was by no means as naive as she seemed; she knew very well which side her bread was buttered.

Though he was too old to fight, James was presently offered a job with an army intelligence unit, and was threatening to close the house and pack his wife off home whether she wanted it or not. An ugly atmosphere developed at her point-blank refusal to do his bidding. Egypt was neutral, maintained Ursula, she would be safer here than in England. Depend on it, James countered, sooner or later the war would be on their doorstep, and who knew what would happen then? But it wasn't her safety that was in question, they both knew that, it was a face-saving ploy for getting rid of her.

Yet how could she have willingly left the only thing she had ever created, her garden?

What had it all been for, the struggle and the unhappiness? More than sixty years later, despite all the love and dedication lavished upon its creation, that garden, that bone of contention, but still the one shining star in an otherwise dark night, had disappeared as though it had never existed. The old feeling of melancholy overwhelmed Ursula as she contemplated where it had once flourished. It wasn't only, however, that the garden had gone and the courtyard had reverted to its original air of sad, dark desolation, with the fountain in the middle as dried-up as when she had first seen it; one could cope with that. It was something about the atmosphere itself that provoked such thoughts, a sort of pervasive accidie. A stain on the air, left by the events that had happened here. She felt oppressed by the thought, and the weight of her years. Or perhaps it was just that the last ten days had taken it out of her.

"Mrs. Palmer?"

She turned with weary resignation, but it wasn't Moira Ledgerwood, being responsible. There was still half an hour of interesting things to see on the upper floors before the group descended for glasses of tea in the cafe. It was the doorkeeper who stood there. He said softly, "I'm sorry the garden is no longer there. It grew wild. They cut it down, during the war, when the house was occupied by English officers."

The filtered light from the windows fell on the ample figure of the doorkeeper in the white *galabiya,* and as he turned slightly, she saw his profile. He knew her name. And suddenly, she knew his. It was a shock. The dark curls were silvered now, but the smile was the same. She saw the young, slim, beautiful youth inside the grossly fat old man. And he, what did he see? A scrawny old woman in her eighties. "Khaled? How did you know me?" she asked faintly.

"By your hair, first of all."

Involuntarily, her hand went up to her white, serviceably short locks. "How could you? I had it cut off, years ago, and it turned white before I was forty."

"I recognised the way it grows."

There was a silence between them. A feeling of what might have been, had they been born in other times, other places. Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

"Mrs. Palmer." He came forward with both hands outstretched and she saw he wore a heavy gold ring with an impressive diamond on his little finger. He clasped both her hands, something he would never have done in the old days, and she allowed him to. "It is so good to see you." Something had radically changed, apart from the fact that his command of English was now excellent. He didn't look like a *moab,* a doorkeeper, a man who sat at a table and took money. He looked like the sort of man who made it.

"But next year would have been a better time to come," he went on. "Then, there will be another garden. The men come next week to begin. I needed to have the house restored first."

She stared at him. "Khaled, are you telling me—?"

"Yes, the house belongs to me now, Mrs. Palmer. After the war, after the officers left, that is . . . " He paused. "It stayed empty, as you must know, until seven years ago, when I bought it, through your lawyers. The condition, the neglect!" He threw up both hands. "But I was too busy to do anything about it until now. A retirement project, you might say, hmm?" He smiled.

She digested the information that he was rich enough to do all this. "You did go to university then? You became an architect?" The guilt that she had carried around for more than half a lifetime began to shift a little.

"Alas, no, that was not possible, in the circumstances."

There was a long pause. "And did you marry Nawal?"

His soft, dark eyes grew inscrutable. "No, I never married anyone at all." He shrugged. *"Malish."* That unquestioning submission to fate. *Malish*—never mind—it doesn't matter. Then he laughed. "I became successful instead. I sell souvenirs to tourists. I have cooperatives to make them, and also shops now in New York, Paris, London. Many times I have thought of you when I am in England."

The hopeful young man with his lofty ambitions, now an entrepreneur, a curio seller, in effect—albeit a rich one. To such do our hopes and aspirations come.

"Why did you run away, Khaled?"

He looked at his feet. "It was necessary. Who would have believed me?"

"There were no questions asked, you should have stayed."

"I heard that, but I was far away by then." He smiled again.

Death due to extreme sickness and diarrhea in this land wasn't so unusual as to cause many enquiries to be made, especially when it was known that the victim was not Egyptian and had been suffering from stomach upsets for ten days or more before dying. It had been put down to one of the many ills European flesh

was heir to, and for that matter Egyptian flesh, too, in this land where clean water was unknown and a mosquito bite could kill.

She and Khaled had been pruning the shrubs. The jasmine had already grown into a tangle and the pink, white, and red oleanders, though pretty, needed to be kept in check. Bunty, decidedly under the weather, was sitting in the shade of the stone alcove, too unwell to do anything but watch. Ursula threw her a long, speculative glance and pensively snipped off an oleander twig, careful not to let the milky sap get onto her hands. "That's a nasty cough you have there, Bunty," she said eventually. "Why don't you ask Nawal for some of her cough syrup?"

"It's this wretched dusty wind," said Bunty, coughing again, her eyes red and sore. "This *khamsin.* I'm going indoors."

"Go and lie down and I'll bring you the medicine. It's very good."

"We-ell, all right. Do you think she might have something for my gippy tummy at the same time?"

"I go bring," said Khaled, and departed with unusual alacrity.

The dry, rasping cough came again and another griping pain almost doubled Bunty up. It wasn't only cholera and malaria, or worse, that one had to fear here in Egypt. Stomach upsets, and quite often being slightly off-colour for unspecified reasons, were unavoidable hazards, facts of life. Bunty looked wretched, but Ursula had little sympathy for her predicament. She had a passion for sticky native sweetmeats, and one didn't care to think about the flies. Ursula had actually seen her carelessly drinking water from the earthenware chatty by the kitchen door because it was always cool, and because the water which Ursula and James forced themselves to drink tasted so nastily of chemicals and didn't, as Bunty pointed out, necessarily make them immune; James himself hadn't quite recovered yet from the same sort of malaise that Bunty was suffering now, and was still extremely queasy, even with the care he took. As for Bunty, it was hardly surprising that her usual rude health sometimes deserted her.

Death, though! No one could have foreseen that. These things took unexpected turns, however, madame, they said at the hospital, shrugging, affected different people in very different ways. A constitution already weakened by bouts of sickness and diarrhea . . . *Inshallah.* There were few formalities.

Afterwards, the desire to shake the dust of Egypt from their feet had been mutual. Home was all there was now, wartime England. It had been Ursula, after all, who joined the WAAF, taking a rehabilitation course in horticulture when she was demobbed.

"I made another garden, Khaled, in England, in Surrey. It became a commercial success. Hollyhocks and lupins, as well as roses." They smiled, remembering. "But no oleander. The climate is

too cold there for oleander."

"Ah." The smiles faded as their glances met.

That day, after she'd administered Nawal's medicine, which Khaled had brought, Ursula had come downstairs again and sat on the carved wooden bench where Bunty had sat, to wait. The garden was tidy, and so still, apart from the splash of the fountain. The oleander twigs which had lain scattered on the brightly patterned tiles had already been swept away and cleared, she noticed.

Nerium oleander. All parts of which, including the nectar, are deadly, even the smoke from the burning plant, and especially its milky sap. Causing vomiting if ingested, sweating, bloody diarrhea, unconsciousness, respiratory paralysis, and, finally, death.

The memory of that day was etched into her brain forever: the sultry heat, the metallic smell of dust, the perfume of the roses. The silence in her head, as though the habitual din of life beyond the high walls had been stopped to let the world listen to what she was thinking. Even the Arab music from the kitchen was stilled. The waiting.

Within half an hour, the sickness had begun, and twenty-four hours later, it was all over.

Khaled was looking at her earnestly. "And you, Mrs. Palmer. Have you had a happy life, Mrs. Palmer?" he questioned acutely.

A happy life! How could that have been possible? Living with the tedium of Bunty's bright inanities, year in, year out. But there were many ways of expiating guilt. In the end she'd become quite fond of her. A delicious irony indeed.

"I have—had no regrets."

"Meesees Palmer!" Hassan's voice, rounding up his flock, echoed down the staircase.

"Ursula!" Moira Ledgerwood coming in, looking for her protégée, finding her. "Oh, the things you've missed! What a pity you didn't come with us." She looked curiously from the old lady to the old doorkeeper.

Ursula held out her hand. "Goodbye, Khaled. Good luck with your project."

She turned to go and then turned back as he said softly, for her ears only, "Your husband should not have died. Nawal's medicine was good."

She smiled. "It must have been intended, Khaled. *Inshallah,* hmm? He must have been too ill for it to make any difference. Who knows?"

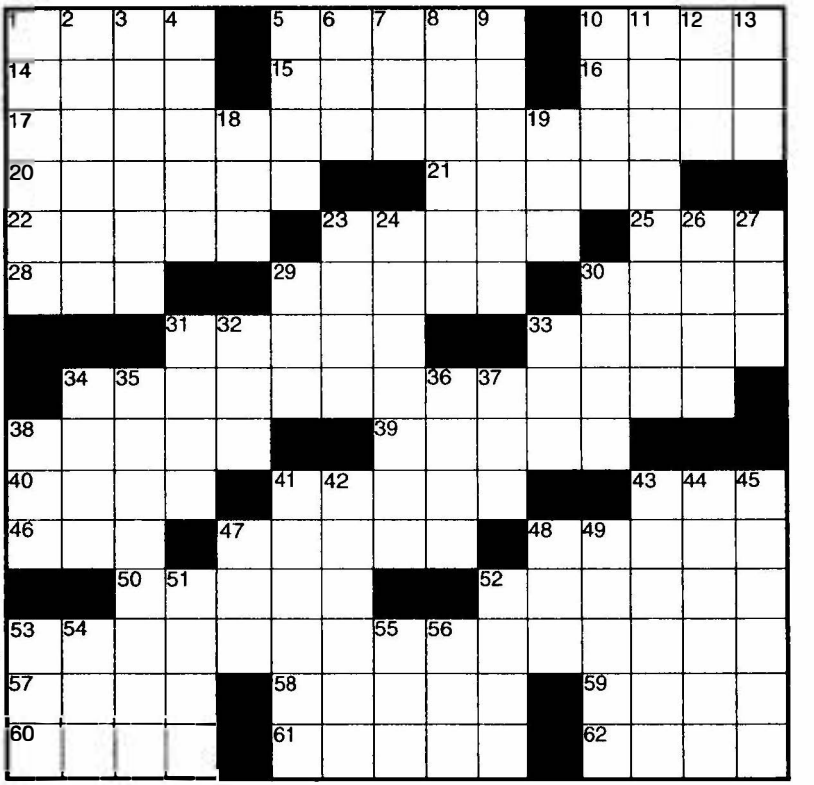
Khaled watched her go. And perhaps Bunty Cashmore would have died, too, if she hadn't been so violently sick again, immediately after swallowing her own dose.

"Who knows, Mrs. Palmer?" he said into the empty room. ●

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

. . . and Buried

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 139

ACROSS

1. Fitzgerald or Raines
5. Twofold
10. Sped
14. Cordelia's father
15. The game's ___
16. Kiln
17. Waltz or tango? Thomas Perry
20. Accompany
21. Pavarotti, e.g.
22. TV star Della
23. Declines
25. Boxing letters
26. Draft org.
29. ___-drop, listen secretly
30. Morse's order
31. Figure out

33. Set out, (forth)
34. Should have known better? Agatha Christie
38. Gray area
39. Clearing in a forest
40. A case for Carol Higgins Clark's sleuth Regan Reilly
41. What Perry and his colleagues do
43. Precedes bag and doll
46. List ender
47. Warning sign
48. "___ man with seven wives," nursery rhyme
50. Dark
52. Not now ___!
53. Do they have mayors? Linda Barnes
57. *Be* ___, Elmore Leonard
58. Muzzle
59. Gaelic
60. ___ *for a Charlatan,* Caroline Roe
61. Keep an ___the ground
62. Gymnast's aim

DOWN

1. Church officials
2. Rents
3. Weapons for knights
4. Bows for string instruments, Sp.
5. How M.C. Beaton's Hamish Macbeth appears at times
6. Craft manned by ETs
7. See 55 down, Sp.
8. Linda Barnes's Ms. Carlyle to family?
9. Mrs. Robert Kennedy's namesakes
10. "There's nothing ___," child's complaint
11. Excess of what is required
12. Stephen ___, star of *The Crying Game*
13. *Latter* ___, Patricia Wentworth
18. Afore
19. John Dunning has four
23. Bean
24. Mrs. Peel or Mr. Steed
26. With 38 down, *You* ___ *Twice,* Edna Buchanan
27. Pen
29. Popular street name
30. Fade
31. Uttered
32. Poem by Horace
33. Turf
34. Word bk.
35. One who carries out the provisions of a will
36. Can be made at a bridge table
37. Latest thing
38. See 26 down
41. Puckered material
42. Mother of Apollo and Artemis
43. Turn back
44. Sergeant's command
45. *The Poyson* ___, Karen Harper
47. Pub brew
48. Anger
49. Mythical murderess
51. *Death on the* ___, Agatha Christie
52. "___be in England"
53. Year in the life of Emperor Constantine
54. Chit
55. See 7 down, Eng.
56. Egyptian king

Art by Mark Evan Walker

LOVER

by Jean Femling

Kenneth Allport—that's who he was last week, and will be again. But right now he's Kenny Stroud, standing in a grove of trees somewhere north of Santa Barbara with Prin the artist in a fierce whole-body hug calculated to imprint himself on her for the next three weeks. Prin, mistress of his northern domain, is one of three women who are exclusively his. None of the three knows the other two exist.

"Are you trying to miss your flight, or what?" Prin says, and blows in his ear.

"Why would I want to leave paradise?" Kenneth tells her. (Inside his head, he's always Kenneth.)

Prin strokes his moustache and then reaches around to snug his warrior's pigtail tight in her little farewell ritual. Under her sweatshirt Prin is silky as a new kitten, but she's got the hands of a day laborer, they scratch his neck.

He senses that she's just a hair impatient for him to be gone so she can get back to her current commission, a bronze garden bench. The base is a slave lying on his back supporting the seat

with his hands and feet, with a texture like dog-licked fur. A Tustin auto dealer is paying Prin $6,500 for it. Her compressor is already chugging away out behind the house.

"I should be back by the eighteenth," Kenneth says. "Watch the sparks, Sweetcakes. I don't want to come back and find you barbequed." Artists always picture themselves wrestling the dark forces of evil chance and annihilation. "Have I forgotten anything?"

Kenneth's smile breaks through, he wipes his hand over his face to hide it. Two of the dresser drawers are permanently his, and a quarter of the bedroom closet. *Road Kill,* his masterwork, is propped up in the dining room. He's been working on some collages with found objects---corncobs, dryer lint, and the like: It's his best so far, centered on a flattened dried crow.

Jean Femling is the author of three published mystery novels: *Getting Mine* and *Hush, Money* from St. Martin's Press, and *Backyard* from Harper & Row. Her short stories have appeared in *Descant, Scholastic, Mr.,* and the anthology *Millenial Women.* A Californian who currently resides in Costa Mesa, Ms. Femling takes us on a hair-raising ride around the state in this tale of a calculating philanderer. †

He sits on the big stump by the front door and plays "Never on Sunday" on his ocarina to amuse Prin's artist friends. They see him as a broken corporate fugitive periodically escaping to this rural haven to reclaim his soul. He belongs.

He swings his battered green canvas two-suiter into the trunk of his Toyota. "Sayonara," Prin says. The last image as he rounds the bend in the driveway is her metronome wave and that big smile for the lonely auditor soon to be winging his way across the Pacific. Whereas Kenneth hasn't actually been to Tokyo for six years, since the company restructured him into a buyout and a glorious early retirement.

Through the golden afternoon Kenneth speeds southward, in transition to Cyria and the Middle Kingdom, singing out loud. "Volare"; God, does that date him. The Middle Kingdom is the most dangerous, and the least secure. Kenneth and Cyria have only been together, as in sharing space, bathroom, breakfast coffee, laundry, three times now, and anything could've happened since he saw her last month. Maybe she's even gone back to her former boyfriend, that cretin, R.Von.

But Kenneth doesn't believe it. He knows he's a master of improvisation, the lightning response—put mouth in gear and brain will follow—and he actually welcomes the challenge. In

great shape overall, except that last night Prin insisted on doing it on the shed roof to celebrate the solstice. Wind like ice up there, he's maybe caught a cold in his back. Throat feels a tad scratchy, too. Better hit the echinacea when he gets in.

Kenneth is hauling up the long Conejo grade at the west end of the San Fernando Valley when he sees far back some jackass in a little white pickup cutting through traffic like a spastic cue ball. Kenneth's two-year-old silver Corolla, his airport car, is as close to invisible as you can get, but he recognizes that it's the weak link. The insurance policy in the glove compartment shows him as Kenneth Allport.

The kid is gaining. Stoned, certainly, he's a wild man, the truck so light that it tips up on two wheels when he swerves in, changing lanes.

Kenneth can now see his face, rapidly getting bigger in his rearview mirror. Yeah, young. And bare-chested; macho puppy. The pickup surges and swings out, pulling up on Kenneth's left, trying to cut in ahead of him. Kenneth slows just that hair like he's going to let the kid in, and then *Zoop!* Just as the kid dives in, Kenneth closes the gap and the kid rips a hard right trying to tuck in behind Kenneth. Instead he shoots on through, out of control, to the outside lane, bounces off a black SUV, and cartwheels across the shoulder and over the side.

Tires shrieking, cars ricocheting every which way—it's like bumper cars back there. Kenneth is already a quarter-mile ahead of the mess but he can see the chaos in his rearview mirror. His arms are shaky and his palms wet, they slide on the wheel. *Damn,* that was close. If he ever got in a bad one, who would they contact? Depends which ID he's got on him. But the insurance would take them straight back to Abby.

Whoomp! Down there behind him a flash and a plume of greasy black smoke going up. "Gotcha!" Kenneth keeps an eye on the black cloud till he goes over the top of the grade and the big smudge drops out of sight.

He gets off the 405 in West L.A. to call Cyria—no cell phones for him, ever: too easy to trace. "Hey, Rumbun. Just wanted you to know I got down okay." He hears the usual salsa in the background. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good," Cyria says. "Right." She sounds subdued, maybe a little down. Then, jacking herself up, "Kick it, mon. Or we'll start the party without you."

Kenneth Central. Kenneth drives into his orange storage unit, one of a couple hundred on a lot off National, shuts the big door, and stands listening to the little metallic *crack . . . crack* of his motor

cooling in the silence. He loves this place. It's the control room of his universe.

He stuffs the green two-suiter away in his wardrobe and gets out the yellow-banded black duffel bag. One woman, one suitcase and never the contents shall mix, except for his trademark black jockey shorts and socks.

Fishing out Cyria's file—he has one for each woman; Cyria's is yellow—he does some leg curls while he reviews it. Birthday not for three months; bra size 36B; partial to silver and turquoise jewelry. Crazy for baby back ribs. Mother Lenore has gallstones; current stepfather's name is Jack. Dislocated her right knee playing soccer when she was ten. Chiropractor's name is Duveen. Ticklish behind the knees, which her dork previous boyfriend never discovered. If he really is previous.

Plus, to cover emergencies, there's a separate file for the aged mother Kenneth has invented complete with an erratic and dangerous autoimmune condition that sometimes nosedives, requiring his immediate attention.

From his drawerful of Little Tokyo souvenirs, Kenneth selects a CD by Momo Nakanishi, the big new Japanese rock star. It's this superb attention to detail that makes him so successful. He even has a file for Sara in Pasadena, in the almost-unthinkable case that Cyria should run aground. Although he looks to be in solid here—they've exchanged HIV tests and their absolute worst experiences, she's even squeezed a few blackheads out of his back—it doesn't feel like a done deal.

Although she swears that anything between her and this redneck dude, R.Von, is totally dead, he could still be in the shadows. Kenneth found his photo on the fridge; big pale guy shaved bald with fluffy sideburns, hanging out the window of his camouflage-painted SUV, scowling, with his bicep mashed against the doorframe to make it bulge. Kenneth dropped the picture in Cyria's junk drawer, where it will soon enough be ruined.

He does a last-minute re-shave, savoring the contented buzz filling the silence. Changed into the black turtleneck, jeans, and stomping boots, he's Ken Bohacik, ready for a night at Club Caliente or Slimers—Cyria loves to whip that long blond hair around, and she knows all the doormen. Kenneth puts on his lean and sullen look—he can sleep tomorrow while she's at work—and stops just long enough to streak some medium brown Rejuvenator into his moustache. Gray sideburns are cool; gray tickly lip-huggers, not.

Cyria lives in a block of beige apartments off Venice Boulevard. Third building over, second story in back with no view, not a problem because Cyria never opens the curtains. She's left her parking place for him, which is a good sign. But first he circles the parking

areas and the block and covers the side streets, to be sure R.Von's SUV is nowhere around.

Kenneth knocks and then, not waiting, he turns the key and swings his suitcase inside, setting it to one side. Salsa, on low. "Cyria? 'Ey, Rumbun?"

The place smells a little strange, tart and sort of animal. "Yo! Anybody home?" He heads down the hall, heavy-footed, *puh-puh*ing to the music. The bathroom door is ajar, dark inside. The light is on in her bedroom.

He sees her legs first, in the burgundy satin pajamas he gave her, sprawled alongside her bed, and then the rest of her, all her front soaked black, arms tumbled, one collapsed across her face, and the dark wet soaking out into the rug and her hair even. Blood, blood and it just happened, it's fresh, he sees little points of light winking. That cretin R.Von, got to've been, stabbed her, made those big rips in the cloth.

A *pop!* And Kenneth freezes, listening. Maybe just the house settling or else he's still here, R.Von, behind the door in the bathroom holding his breath or maybe the other bedroom ready to lunge and get him, too. Kenneth is back down the hall and out the front door, willing himself to fake normal. Nobody in the hall right now, thank God, and he's off down the back stairs, and the next thing he knows he's driving up Venice Boulevard again, automatically heading for Kenneth Central, still seeing that sprawled vacant female body with the blood spreading.

What friggin' luck. Is this a nightmare? *But I was just talking to her.* With R.Von's knife at her throat? Surprised her when she came home, just jumped out at her. Or else he has a key, too. Or maybe talked his way in, "Hey, can't we be friends?" and then started stabbing her.

Ah, shit! No! He's left his suitcase in Cyria's apartment. Pull over, stop, think about this. Probably R.Von's gone, why would he hang around? Nobody's that stupid. Kenneth slows in the curb lane, trying to stop; but no way can he make himself go back there and try for that suitcase.

Only one place to go.

Back in Kenneth Central, he drags out the really good black leather bag, inconspicuously monogrammed, that Abby gave him two Christmases ago. No need to check, it's ready. The other one—what's it doing next to Cyria's front door? Somebody stole it. None of Kenneth's fingerprints anywhere in the apartment except on the doorknob, and with luck whoever comes in will obliterate those. But what about last month's? Like nobody else has been in there since? Hah. Two-timing bitch. But a terrible waste—those great legs.

R.Von's DNA must be sprinkled all over the place. Not to men-

tion the knife that killed her. Maybe from Cyria's kitchen? No way can they pin this on Kenneth, that's out of the question. But they can totally screw up his life. Run through the state fingerprint records, knock-knock on Abby's door, "We're looking for Kenneth Allport," and his empire is in shambles.

What if R.Von somehow did follow him? Get out of here fast, and the sooner the better. Element of surprise. Haul a quick left and out the back way.

At the last second Kenneth realizes and peels out of his dancing-man outfit like it's scorching him and into coordinated slacks and shirt. Everything shut down here, motor idling in the prickly darkness as the big door creaks slowly upward. —No! He's got to sit out here waiting in the light, a juicy pigeon, till he can reverse the door and start it down again. Now, move!

Free at last. Nobody, nobody follows him onto the 405 southbound, heading back to Orange County and Abby, matriarch of his dynasty, mother of generations. Unless this R.Von has got a relay system set up. The thought makes Kenneth smile, the guy's so obviously a creature of impulse. They'll certainly nail R.Von for it. All Kenneth has to do is stay out of sight awhile and he'll be home free.

Cops can screw up. It happens all the time.

Kenneth hits the 5 and then takes the Alicia off-ramp and heads up into his own dark, hilly neighborhood of big comfortable houses, mature trees mostly blocking the streetlights. Lush, symmetrical flowers and shrubbery. A few lighted windows still, some even unshaded. Not theirs, of course.

He carries his suitcase up to the front door and lets himself in. Ah; dump Cyria's key, right away.

"Hold it right there, mister." Kenneth is looking into the muzzle of a big gun, a handgun barrel braced on the back of the blue wing chair and Abby half-behind, wild-eyed, aiming dead at him.

"Stop, stop! What are you doing!" Kenneth yells. "Stop it! It's only me!" Abby is absolutely rigid, he has to talk her down. "Where did you come up with that thing? I didn't even know you had a gun."

"Well, what'd you expect me to do here by myself all the time? Just damn lucky I didn't shoot you. Ever heard of the telephone?"

"Some trouble in Yokohama." Kenneth jumps in and just lets it rip. "Evidently a major, major client of ours neglected to pay off his yakuza and negotiations were getting a bit messy. So we decided to come home for some R and R." As he talks they migrate into the kitchen. The floor needs sweeping, it's littered with black thread and dust kitties and bits of leafy green, probably part of Abby's soup-kitchen stuff. She's padding around in old sweats and thick socks with her hair uncombed.

"You hungry?" Abby asks. "I made some split-pea soup yesterday. It's in the fridge."

As in, *Get it yourself.* The wayward-kid treatment. Kenneth is trembling uncontrollably, the bright kitchen hurts his eyes; he still has Cyria's bloody bedroom front and center in his brain. "I seem to've gotten a chill on the plane," he says, folding his arms tight.

"Go and start your shower and I'll get out the Mentholatum," Abby says. "I'll call you when your soup's ready."

Say R. Von came after him at Cyria's with the knife, and he ran. Panicked. That's the most he could be guilty of—self-defense. Eyes closed, Kenneth is getting himself pummeled by his pulsating hot shower when he faintly hears the phone ring. What? It must be almost midnight.

"Who was that?" he asks when he's out and pajamaed.

"Who knows?" Abby says. "Some drunk in a bar, lot of background noise, music, loud talk. Kept yelling something like, 'It's serious!' " She shrugs.

About Cyria? Was it R. Von, or just coincidence? "If he's got the wrong number, liable to happen again," Kenneth says. "Next time let me get it." But how could he get this number? Not the cops, they wouldn't operate that way. Give you a warning? Unless it's a trap. Kenneth can smell Abby's Mon Tresor cologne, she's put on the flowered robe and combed her hair. She must be expecting his usual home-again salute.

Kenneth coughs and leans against the doorjamb, doing a good wheeze. Yipping at Abby's cold hands, he lets her turn up his pj top and work a layer of Mentholatum into his chest and back, which is probably even more satisfying for her. Afterward he lies in the dark worrying about R. Von. If he's got this number, he's got this address.

"Why don't you take a couple pills and get some sleep?" Abby says. "I've disconnected the phone."

"Just jet lag." Kenneth turns over. Wait till Abby's asleep and then go check. The next time he looks, the red numerals on his nightstand clock say 4:43. He slips out of the bed like fog, puts on jogging clothes, and steps out the back way and around to the side of the house to reconnoiter.

The night is just now giving up, letting walls and rooftops solidify again. Nobody around, only a couple of misted-over cars parked on the streets. —His car license. That's how R. Von traced him. Got to be.

Kenneth checks out the cars and then covers six blocks in every direction. The only signs of life he finds are two old cats eyeing each other across a wet lawn and tail-twitching, and several commuters' bathroom lights already glowing orange. Abby's beige hatchback parked in the driveway. Borrow it and get out of here.

But it's loaded up with boxes of stuff for her soup-kitchen gig. She'll never let go of it.

Abby sits puffy-eyed at the kitchen table with her hands around a fresh mug of coffee. "I no more than plugged in the phone and *brrring*. Sounded like the same guy. Partying all night? I didn't even answer him, I just sort of dropped the phone. Did you see the paper out there?"

"What kind of dumb question is that? If I had I would've brought it in, right?" The phone rings and Kenneth grabs it. "Hello!"

A younger guy, deep voice; sounds like he's broad-chested and smiling, and Kenneth instantly puts a name to him: R.Von. "You and me've got some unfinished business—"

Kenneth, Kenny, Ken screens the phone with his body and breaks the connection. "Oh, Robert," Kenneth says. "Yeah . . . Yeah . . . But why couldn't he've—" He argues mildly with the dead phone. "Understood. You're right; I'd be the best one. When's his flight come in?"

Kenneth scribbles something nobody could read on the phone pad and tears off the page. When he turns around, Abby is smiling at him. "What?" he says.

"Oh, you're just so predictable," she says. "Which is good."

He risks a quick peek in Abby's nightstand for her gun. It's not there, and he has no time to look anywhere else.

Only one freeway from here to L.A. That must be what R. Von's counting on. Sitting out there at the on-ramp with binocs, waiting for Kenneth to come by. And a cell phone—maybe he even has buddies staked out along the way. Morning rush-hour traffic—how likely is that?

Instead of getting on the freeway, Kenneth heads inland. In back of an all-night Albertson's, out where the employees park, he pulls up, gets out his trusty little Swiss Army knife, and in two minutes bags himself a different license plate. Five miles farther he pulls off again and changes licenses, stuffing his old one down into an overflowing trash can.

Inland, inland. Full daylight now, the traffic an assault, the invasion of the iron cannibals. He watches for the camouflage SUV but he can't lock into that concept, R. Von could be driving anything. He drops Cyria's key in a storm drain and sits out rush hour in a Pancake House in Pomona, carbing up for whatever the day holds, and fills his gas tank at an Arco, cash only. Anonymous is invisible is safe.

Nothing on the morning news about a woman's body being found in West L.A. Maybe it's just too common. Maybe Cyria hasn't been found yet. That bastard. Cyria, wasted. Exactly the word for it.

Thank God he has one refuge, one lair left. Stay out of sight, off the cops' radar screen till this all blows over. R. Von the macho exhibitionist, they're bound to catch him.

In the meantime, cover your tracks. A stop at Office Depot, another at Target. Shortly before ten Kenneth pulls his Toyota into Kenneth Central and goes to work destroying his past. The radio is a yammer of the continual movement out there, the metal torrents cracking and congealing. It's getting hot in here; must be warm outside. Cyria will not be in good shape. He feels twitchy being this close to her place. So?

By midafternoon the place is stripped, every last note and folder shredded, clothes labels removed. A farewell shave and he stuffs his shaver into a big brown plastic bag, all his personal effects wiped down, knowing he will have missed some prints. If they ever look. Maybe they've already picked up R. Von. It seems more and more likely, given R. Von's basic stupidity. And Kenneth's supernatural luck.

Out again into the maelstrom. God, how do these poor suckers stand it every day? Yellow pages at his side, he drops off the bags at thrift shops in Westchester, Torrance, and Hawthorne, and then stops at Granny's Kitchen for country-fried steak and gravy. And he's on his way.

By the time Kenneth hits the top of the Sepulveda Pass and looks out across the San Fernando Valley it's full dark and the Valley floor is a fantasy light-board, moving belts of red and white ahead, strings of golden streetlights and the millions of cold points scattered between. Time to start on his finest story.

Just past the Port Hueneme sign Kenneth becomes aware of a darkish SUV back there which has been holding steady for some time now. Something not quite right about the color. A spray of headlights washes over the SUV and he sees that it's mottled; like R. Von's. That is impossible. How could he do it? Staked out Kenneth Central and followed him ever since? Must've. Insane. He couldn't know Kenneth would come back there. Plus, driving that thing? Doesn't he even care if he gets caught?

Kenneth moves into the center lane and speeds up a little. The SUV holds its course for maybe a mile, and then, lazily, moves over. Kenneth slows to sixty. Another pause, the gap is closing, and then the SUV slows, too.

Or else he's tracking Kenneth some other way. A bug; he put it on while Kenneth was finding Cyria; because he's a maniac. Maybe it's not R. Von, maybe there's a whole club driving those SUVs. The paint job's an option, an upgrade. It's an Army vehicle.

But Kenneth knows it's that Neanderthal goon behind him burning with a steady homicidal flame, and he's got to deal with

R. Von right now. He squeezes the steering wheel and then releases it, commanding himself to hang loose.

The turnoff sign looms for the 33, the highway into Ojai, and Kenneth makes his move. Looking like he's going on past, at the last minute Kenneth swings the wheel and screes into a rocking curve onto the inland highway, plunging onward till he spots a little cluster of stores up ahead, dark this time of night. R.Von's SUV has followed him around, closing the gap now like he's smelling blood.

Kenneth slows, flipping on his right turn signal, and pulls off the road in front of the stores, stopping just beyond the edge of the paving. It's late and traffic is light, only a solitary car zooms past now and then, as if eager to get home. R.Von swings in behind Kenneth, spraying gravel, and comes to a jouncing stop beyond Kenneth and roughly parallel to the storefronts.

The guy leaning into the glare of Kenneth's headlights is straight off Cyria's fridge. He raises a hand in a kind of salute to Kenneth and then his door opens, one leg swings out, and he steps down. His door-slam is an explosion in the country night. R.Von big as life, got to be, standing there spraddle-legged alongside his monster vehicle, palms out to show they're empty. *Pretend I don't have that big knife stowed right here, out of sight.* He starts to grin, showing his teeth. And now he's *beckoning.*

Kenneth waves back once to keep him right there, Don't get back in! and opens his own door like he's getting out, too. Perfect. Not even closing his door, Kenneth stomps on the gas and roars straight at him, lights blazing, as that idiot grin turns into a shout and he lunges sideways, trying to twist away and Kenneth feels a mushy kind of thump.

His attention splits, Get him! and Don't wreck the car, you need it to get out of here, and miraculously he stops in time, barely tapping the SUV. R.Von is down, out of sight, and Kenneth is already backing up automatically, just enough to turn left into his U-turn. Kenneth starts forward again, his front wheels go over some obstacle, *bump-bump,* and then the back wheels, like a speed bump only lumpier.

Kenneth yanks the wheel around in a spasm of relief and quick as thought he's back on the 33 and out of there, heading for the Coast Highway again. No cars even near him when he got R. Von, and nobody coming, still. Then he's around the bend and it's all out of sight already. Behind him.

The big highway heading north again, the ocean a black void alongside. Too bad there aren't any car washes open this time of night. He starts to laugh out loud, and he's a little lightheaded. Does the car show some signs of damage? Don't stop to look, not around here. He's not out of the woods yet; but Kenneth feels a

shout of triumph in his chest. He wants to roar, slash, tear down trees.

It's almost midnight when Kenneth reaches the turnoff leading into Prin's place. She'll be in bed asleep, exhausted. Better be careful waking her. Not that Prin is the cautious type. A lot of the time she doesn't even bother to lock her doors at night, he has to do it.

Kenneth droops over the wheel, aware now that the danger is past how exhausted he is. Plenty to do in the morning. Through the trees he glimpses a huge moon rising. And he can hear some kind of slow, deep-throated drum beating. There's a sudden flare of light beyond the house, illuminating the tree trunks around that side. Oh Lord—is Prin doing one of her weird solstice ceremonies?

Five or six women are dancing around a fire blazing up in an oil drum with a tall woman beating on its rusty sides, swinging drumsticks as long as baseball bats. *Boom! Boom!* The flames leap up six, ten feet and Kenneth shouts, "Are you crazy?" but nobody hears him.

They're leaping and chanting like savages, wrapped in trailing black and white rags, arms and faces painted in big black and white Holstein splotches with white eye-masks and eyebrows, black ropey wigs bouncing. One of them sees him and hollers and they charge him, shrieking, all but the drummer.

"Friend! Friend!" he yells, holding up his arms, but they grab him, screaming and yelping, pushing him from one to another like a big toy.

"Here! Have a drink!" One of them pushes a coconut-shell bowl up to his mouth.

"No, thanks," he's trying to say but they've got his head locked immobile, stroking his cheeks and coaxing, pressing the bowl to his lips as they crowd around him, soft insistent female parts pressing close.

"Just a sip!" one of them hisses in his ear, might as well go along with it, and he takes a swallow. Warm and piercingly sweet, plenty of herbs, and strong—it's firewater, the fumes rise into his sinuses; fruit brandy, maybe. He splutters trying to back off but it's useless and he drinks, laughs, drinks again, being a good sport. He smells that hot, rank sweat, excitement, fear, sex, strong, strong—they must be on something.

"Thaat's it! Just another swallow. One more, now." It's Big Mama, he knows her, he knows them all. He's going to be falling-down drunk. What good is that at an orgy? Laughing, he tries to tell them but they're turning him around, strong hands spinning him among them faster and faster. Suddenly they let go and he lurches and topples into a heap.

Struggling, Kenneth pulls himself up into a sort of cross-legged sit. The world is seriously deranged. He may be going to be sick.

He sprawls back on his elbows, his brain filled with flames against black, they're dancing and chanting again and he tries to grasp what they're chanting, the same thing over and over, but he's out of it, he's leaving.

"Lover, liar, 'lectric chair!" Kenneth tries to understand, it might mean something; but he can't, it's slipping away, it's gone.

Cold, cold. Kenneth wakes up curled tight, in the dark, a rough wood floor under him scratching his cheek, and grit. His whole right side is beyond cold, it's totally without feeling—he's had a stroke. He rolls onto his back and with his left hand picks up his right arm, a rubbery foreign useless appendage, and lets it drop on his chest. He massages it furiously, slapping and pounding. Ah; a few prickles. Sensation begins to return. He collapses, relieved, and slams into some kind of metal apparatus, bruising his back.

Outside it's daytime, light filters under the battered wooden door and through the cracks between the rough wall-boards. He knows where he is now; in the windowless storage shed at the back of Prin's property, surrounded by half-finished and abandoned metal sculptures and props and the found objects she's so crazy about.

Something heavy clamped to his leg, digging into him. He's held by a thick circle of metal locked around his left ankle, fastened to a six-foot length of heavy chain. The other end is shackled to an antique lamppost on its side, with three curved rusty fern fronds at its base. Prin's doing, certainly. More of it; a green three-pound coffee can in the middle of the floor with a taped-on sign, PEE HERE. Kenneth gives a mighty yank to test the old iron, and only manages to bruise his leg. The lamppost barely quivers.

The girls got totally carried away with themselves last night. He's really ticked at this stupid stunt of Prin's, but uneasy, too. He can't remember any details, and besides, his head is pounding—what did they put in that coconut?—but he knows it's not good. He has the sense she's found out something. But what? How?

Kenneth throws back his head and laughs, making a big noise. "All right!" he shouts. "Enough, already!" And he listens. In the distance, probably in the house, which is maybe a hundred feet away, he hears some kind of music with a heavy beat. And female voices, two or three, in conversation.

He picks up the length of chain and whips it against the lamppost and a big dusty pot-shaped form alongside, making a major racket. When he stops, the voices have stopped. Then they start up again. What's going on? Prin can be pretty eccentric, but she's not flat-out crazy.

Use your head. He searches his pockets and turns up his billfold—no way a credit card could open that shackle, which looks like a relic from a chain gang. Handkerchief, pen, Chapstick; his

little pocket notebook with all the notes torn out. No car keys. No watch. No shoes; only his usual black socks. On hands and knees he scrabbles under and around these cumbersome artifacts, searching the length of his chain in every direction for something, a nail, anything to open that manacle. Besides the headache, he has a ferocious thirst.

Beyond the door now, a quiet, measured sound, like silk tearing, over and over. He waits.

The door bursts open, it's filled with the silhouette of a woman with wild blond hair and Kenneth screams. It's Cyria, wearing the same burgundy satin pajamas blotched dark and stiff with her blood. She stands whetting a big bowie knife on a flat gray stone.

"Oh my God. Oh my God!" The shed rocks, Kenneth can't breathe. He sags back clutching his chest, his heart jarring his ribcage. "You're not dead." Cyria watches him, her hand moves steadily. When he can speak again he takes a deep ragged breath, and another. "—You set me up. You bitch!"

"You bastard! You never even checked to see if I was alive. Did you!" She takes a step closer and points the knife at him, her face swollen with rage. "You turd. Slimeball! You couldn't even stop to look if I was still breathing."

"But you were covered with blood! I saw it running!"

"Goat's blood." Cyria stops herself, holding the knife upright, and gives him a wide crazy smile. "We're all full of blood. You're full of blood." She goes back to work, her thumb driving the blade along the stone. "Guess what we're going to do to you," she says, "Rumbun."

This whole thing is a nightmare, it's not actually happening. "You don't understand," Kenneth says. "Thank God you're alive. That's all that matters." He sags onto the floor like a big worm, preparing to edge closer. Maybe he can grab her, hold her as a hostage. Cyria spits onto the shed floor next to his hand, and leaves.

He finds his voice and yells after her. "How about a little water out here, at least?"

Getting hot in Prin's shed, it's one of those SoCal days where the temperature rises forty degrees by one P.M., and Kenneth is unbelievably thirsty. He tries bellowing for water: no response. This is inexcusable. He's always treated his women with complete consideration. He slams one iron object against another, *clang, clang,* to make Prin think he's destroying her work. But of course she knows this stuff is indestructible.

Cyria arguing with Prin. And another voice . . . Abby? Yes; unmistakable. And regrettable; it cut into his options considerably. Which one of them made the big find in the first place? Cyria the

hottest about it, setting him up like that. Using R. Von as their little errand boy. Do they know anything about R. Von yet?

From the limit of his chain Kenneth can see just the rear corner of the house, dark red siding. Once he gets a glimpse of Abby in her floppy sunhat, squinting this way trying to see him in the dark. "Hey!" he shouts, and she jumps out of sight.

He sits cross-legged in the meditation pose, ready in case Prin appears. A shadow passes over him; he looks up just as a plastic soft drink bottle is flung in, some off-brand orange soda. He guzzles it, licks off the top, sucks out the last drop, and then laps off the moisture on the bottle, miming desperation on the chance he's being observed from some angle.

"More!" he hollers. "What good am I to you dead?" He expected that to get a laugh, but there was nothing. The cold shoulder for the naughty boy. They're trying the old oubliette maneuver, stick him out here and forget about him.

He roams the radius of his chain, trying to find something for a pry bar or a weapon. A steady beat from the house, Cyria's eternal salsa, and sometimes bursts of conversation or argument. Once Kenneth hears the phone, three rings, and discovers he's been asleep. He becomes aware of a soft conversation at a distance, Cyria's voice and then Abby's. Abby's the one who'll fix this. After the others have vented, she'll come up with the common-sense compromise.

"Oh no," Abby says. "I'll just tell the kids he's taken a long-term assignment in Yokohama." Kenneth opens his mouth for a sarcastic comment, but changes his mind. The voices move out of range.

Cooling off now, the day slopes toward evening, and in the house he can hear the clatter of pots and dishes, they're making dinner. With twilight, gusty laughter and more argument, certainly about him: The harder they try to ignore him, the clearer it is that he's still the center of their universe. A sudden sizzle of something dumped in a hot pan. So far all they've got is a standoff. He pictures being led in to eat with them, the captive male at the head of the table.

"YEE-hah!" Abby; she must be drinking. And then a pistol shot. Showing off for the girls. No; for him.

"That's enough," Prin snaps. A few minutes later, Kenneth hears the drumbeats start, *Boom—Boom—Boom—Boom* on the big oil drum. Cyria warming up for another ceremony? Good. When they take him out he'll be loose, he can use that. The drumbeats cease, followed by unmistakable dinner sounds.

Clank and chatter of women in the kitchen, doing dishes. Quiet footsteps; a figure slips in the door and folds down to sit on the floor opposite. Prin.

"Finally, the mastermind," he says, careful to sound energyless,

only mildly irritated, and nonthreatening.

"Sh," she says. "Yeah, right."

"Well, hey." Kenneth can see her quite clearly, his eyes are well-adapted to the dim shed.

"What a royal pain in the butt you turned out to be," Prin says.

"Likewise." A foot closer and he could grab her. "Hasn't this charade about run its course?" What he's got to do is figure out where the key to the leg iron is. Is it conceivable she has it on her? Kenneth squints, trying for a look at the pockets of her baggy jeans.

"We have major differences about what to do with you," Prin says. Kenneth figures Prin would just like him out of there, so she can get back to work. But she'll have to play her Righteous Revenge role first.

"Right now it's a tossup between staking you out in the woods somewhere," she says, "and feeding you something long-acting and eventually fatal, like horse tranquilizers." That's to remind him that Cyria is a physical therapist and has access to prescription drugs. "How you feeling?" Prin asks. She wants him to wonder about that off-tasting orange drink.

"Thirsty. Hungry. Dirty. How would you feel?" Kenneth stretches out, *flop!* being harmless. Prin is just inside the door, still nicely out of reach.

"Risky business, right?" he says. "How you keeping your friends from coming around?" With the illumination from the house and the overcast night sky, Kenneth can see her quite well. Go for it, with or without the key: She's a hostage. Just as she shifts into a cross-legged position across from him, Kenneth sees a straight brownish edge like maybe wood in her jeans pocket. And it all comes clear. She's setting up his escape.

He stretches out on his belly, arching up as if his back hurts, which in fact it does. Prin straightens one leg, resettling herself—she's just close enough for him to make a dive, flattened out like a flying snake, and grab one ankle. He yanks her toward him and covers her mouth before she has time to let out more than a startled yip. With one hand he holds her mouth and jams her head down, straddling her and then kneeling on her back, fighting her thrashing legs while he works off her shoes and socks.

She's putting on a good show, trying to bite him, her teeth grabbing at his palm for a hold and then she does and bites down—he wrenches loose, twisting her head sideways and tries to stuff the socks in her mouth. She locks her teeth; he holds her nose till she gasps for air, and then shoves them in.

Next his handkerchief, just long enough on the diagonal to knot around her head holding the socks in place. Her shoelace to lash her wrists together, tight, tight, and then the other one for good measure.

"There," he says, breathing hard, "we can relax for a minute."

She looks furious, the vein on her forehead is standing out. "Just behave yourself and you won't get hurt." That sounds like a B movie and he wants to laugh. Next, her pockets. He works the wood out, his biggest gamble yet. Yes! A big old-fashioned key is fastened to it. The key fits the keyhole in the shackle and he's out, loose. He transfers the shackle to Prin's ankle and her hands fall away slack: She's stopped moving.

Slowly, silently Kenneth circles around the back of Prin's house, staying out of the squares of pooled light from the unshaded windows. From the dark side of the house it's a straight shot to the driveway.

He runs full tilt for his car, the crushed granite of the driveway cutting into his stockinged feet.

"Prin?" Abby calls out the back door as Kenneth drops to his knees on the passenger side scrabbling for the extra key box. What if Abby already got it?

Cyria's shout bounces off the trees as Kenneth's fingers contact the smooth metal. Yes, and yes. He slides in the passenger side shoving the key in and guns backwards down the driveway as Cyria and Abby come around the front of the house shouting at him. With a crunch and spurt of gravel the women, house, lights whirl away behind him and he's alone in the dark.

The cool night air rushes over him, and Kenneth is lightheaded with relief. Headlights on, everything in order. Late enough that traffic on Highway 1 is light. The man in the rearview mirror is a stranger, beard-stubble partly grey, lines of grime around his eyes. He looks a bit like George Clooney making a prison break.

The car is the first priority. How to ditch it? L.A.; park somewhere around MacArthur Park and leave it with the keys in it. Be gone in fifteen minutes. And then he finds some cheap hotel to flop. Get himself reoutfitted, and then maybe look up Sara in Pasadena.

But first, find a do-it-yourself car wash and scrub down the car. And even before that, stop at a drugstore or K-Mart and pick up a pair of thongs.

Say R. Von did survive. He's not going to want to tell the real story, or Cyria, either. Goat's blood. They could both be sued for entrapment.

Kenneth is coming into the outskirts of a town when he sees a police car approaching him, going up-coast; no flashers on, everything routine. The jolt of adrenaline is like a kick in the chest, and his first thought is Prin. No, she can't stand to have anything to do with cops or government. Coincidence. Kenneth is doing 80 and pulls himself back to 72 or so as he reaches down to peel off one sock and then the other and drop them out the window. His story is, he left his shoes on the beach.

In his rearview mirror the police car takes the curve and is

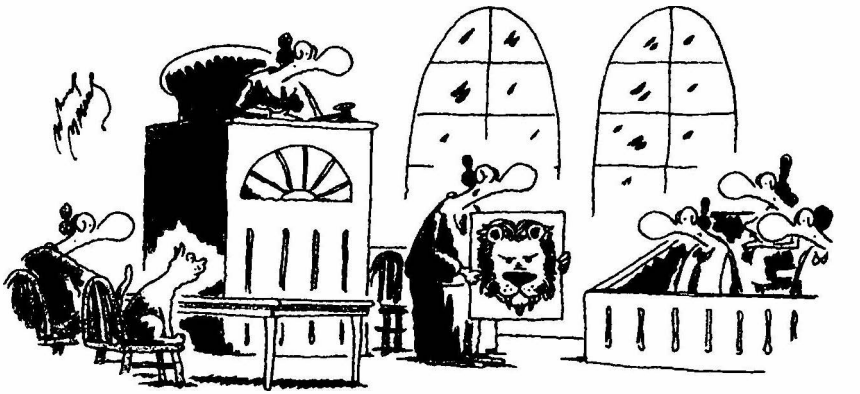
already out of sight. And here come two more cop cars up from the south. Behind Kenneth the first cop reappears with his blue flashers whirling. At the same time the two newcomers screech into U-turns and pull up in front of Kenneth, blocking his path.

The first-comer stops behind Kenneth with his hood angled partway into the lane. "What's the problem, Officer?" Kenneth asks, looking suitably puzzled. The policeman motions him out, leans him up against his own car, and feels along his body.

"Not very often you see somebody with both taillights out at the same time," the cop tells Kenneth. He looks really pleased.

"Amazing," Kenneth says. "I wonder what the odds of that happening are? Makes me a bit skeptical. Like maybe my buddy's played a little trick on me?" Kenneth is having trouble concentrating because the two other cops are squatting down examining the front end of his Toyota. One of them straightens up and heads back with that weighty big-boss walk, boot heels scuffing.

"What can you tell us about the foreign substance splashed on your grillwork and in your wheel well?" this one asks Kenneth. Who can see that the cop's already pretty damn sure what it is. Thanks to the matchless skill of sweet Prin, the complete artist. Whose day of retribution will come: He, Kenneth, will see to that. No matter how long it takes. ●



"I now show you a photograph of the defendant before he was prepared for trial."

The Last Story

by Charles Ardai

This year marks two noteworthy anniversaries: the tenth anniversary of the death of former *EQMM* contributor Isaac Asimov and the thirtieth anniversary of the first appearance of Asimov's popular detective characters the Black Widowers. Author Charles Ardai, who as a young writer was taken under Isaac Asimov's wing, has revived the characters for one last detective dinner. . . .

Tom Trumbull was the last to arrive. He flew through the doors of the Milano restaurant, clambered upstairs to the private room where the monthly banquets were held, and deposited his umbrella in the elephant-foot stand just inside the door. He was soaked from the knees down, and he shook each pant leg in turn in a vain attempt to stop them from clinging to his skin. "A scotch and soda—" he began, but a glass was pressed into his hand before he could finish his request.

"Scotch and soda, Mr. Trumbull," said Henry, the Black Widowers' peerless waiter. "For a dying man."

"Come on, Tom," said Emmanuel Rubin, his sparse beard quivering with annoyance. "Sit down. You've kept us all waiting long enough."

"Let him dry off," said Mario Gonzalo, the club's artist member, who was putting the finishing touches on his caricature of the evening's guest. "At his age, catching a cold could be dangerous."

"You're the same age, Mario, and I don't see you worrying about catching a cold," Rubin said.

"That's because I arrived on time, before the rain started," Gonzalo said, "which is more than I can say for you and your guest. Pay no attention to his outbursts, Tom."

"Do I ever?" Trumbull hung his suit jacket over the back of his chair and took a long swallow. To his left, patent attorney Geoffrey Avalon sat stirring the ice in his glass with a long index finger. Avalon took a careful sip, bringing the glass to exactly half full, then set the remainder aside.

Across the table, James Drake and Roger Halsted were embroiled in a heated discussion about science education. It was a topic about which both had strong opinions. As a working organic chemist, Drake felt more emphasis on scientific curricula was needed at the pre-college level, and as a junior high school math teacher, Roger Halsted passionately agreed. That both men were on the same side of the argument didn't seem to interfere with their ability to carry on about it as though fighting to the death.

To their right and to Manny Rubin's left—which is to say at the head of the table—sat a slight man with a prominent chin and rather less hair than he'd had the first time he'd attended one of the Black Widowers' dinners as a guest. Both of these characteristics were highlighted in the finished caricature Mario Gonzalo now held up for inspection and then pinned to the wall next to his first sketch of Gary Nemerson, completed a dozen years earlier.

"Manny," Trumbull said, his voice rumbling ominously, "I never put it past you to demonstrate ignorance of the rules under which our group operates, but even you must have noticed that not once in thirty years has a guest been invited back for a second dinner."

"That's not a rule, it's just happenstance," Rubin said. "None of your guests has ever merited a second invitation. Gary did."

"Why? Because as one of your fellow writers he's hungrier than our other guests and less well equipped to purchase his own meals?"

"No, because as one of my fellow writers he's got more interesting things to say than any ten of the government types you work with." Rubin turned to his guest. "Tom's just upset because his guest canceled on him the last time he hosted. He's been taking it out on the rest of us ever since."

Nemerson smiled briefly but said nothing. He looked purposeful, even impatient to get on with the evening's grilling. But before it could begin, there was the small matter of the meal.

Henry moved to the far end of the table, opposite Nemerson, and cleared his throat. Looking down, each of the Black Widowers saw that a plate containing an appetizer of ceviche with capers and julienned chilies had, silently and as if by magic, appeared before them.

"Gentlemen," Henry said, "dinner is served."

The main course continued the Latin American theme with grilled strips of pork loin and chorizo on a bed of wilted baby spinach and was followed by a dessert of fresh churros. While everyone else was preoccupied with sampling the dark chocolate and *dulce de leche* dipping sauces, Drake said to Gary Nemerson, "I'm curious—the umbrella you brought tonight, is it the same one that caused you so much trouble the last time you were here?"

Nemerson blushed pinkly, all the way up to his rapidly retreating hairline. "No, as fine an instrument as it was, that umbrella wasn't well enough constructed to outlast a decade of New York winters. I have never found its equal, and the one I brought tonight is nothing special."

"That first umbrella," Drake continued in his hoarse smoker's voice, "the one that almost broke up your engagement until Henry helped you find it, did you ever mislay it again?"

"I protest!" Rubin's beard shook with the force of his exclamation and his eyes, magnified to the size of golf balls behind his thick lenses, strained with indignation. "We haven't finished eating, and he's already starting the grilling!"

"Nonsense," Drake growled. "I'm just making conversation."

"You're in no position to protest, Manny," Trumbull said, "given the breach, if not of rules then at least of tradition, that you've committed tonight."

"Breach?" Manny could barely contain himself. "At least my guest showed up!"

"It's all right, Manny," Nemerson said. "I'm happy to answer the question. No, Mr. Drake, I can't recall another occasion when I mislaid my umbrella, or at least not so completely that I couldn't promptly find it again. I am a careful person, and one of the matters I take particular care about is where I put things, so that I can find them again. I wish other people were half as careful, frankly."

"It's interesting," Roger Halsted said, softly and with a slight stutter, "that people generally take greater care with where they put things when they don't want them found than when they do."

"Oh, I don't think that's true," Avalon said. "It's just that those are the cases you hear about, because they're more interesting. No one would read a Manny Rubin mystery story about someone who carefully puts his valuables in a safe-deposit box and whose heirs find them there, safe and sound, when they go to look. A story about a miser who hides his valuables in an old tree stump, on the other hand . . ."

"Listen to you, 'an old tree stump.' Your concept of mystery plotting stopped with the Hardy Boys," Rubin said. "As it happens, I agree with Roger. People take it for granted that they'll be able to find things when they put them down, and that's how so many things get lost. It's when you want something to be hard for other people to find that you take pains to place it carefully."

Nemerson chose this moment to weigh in, and from the expression on his face it seemed he had more on his mind than idle conversation. "Unfortunately," he said, "my experience is that things can get lost either way, and when you're looking for them it doesn't much matter whether they were hidden on purpose or by accident. I'm dealing with a situation of this sort right now, in fact, and I

was actually hoping you might help me with it." Silence greeted this remark from all corners of the room, but Nemerson soldiered on. "Seeing as how you were able to help me so successfully the last time."

"So that's why he merited a second invitation," Trumbull roared. "You brought him because he's mislaid something else—maybe his galoshes this time, or is it his keys? What are we, his personal lost-and-found?"

"Hear him out," Rubin said, with an uncharacteristically conciliatory tone. "I have, and I think you'll find it interesting."

Avalon's luxurious eyebrows crept upwards. "I guess the grilling will begin now," he said.

Rubin rattled his teaspoon against the side of his water glass to signal the formal start of the evening's proceedings. "Gary," Rubin said, "as you know, we would normally start by asking how you justify your existence, but you answered the question the last time you ate with us, so I think we can dispense with that bit of tradition this time." He shot a small dirty look in Trumbull's direction, then aimed an index finger across the table at Jim Drake. "Dr. Drake, since you couldn't contain yourself earlier, would you like to do the honors?"

Drake took a pull on the cigarette he'd just lit and balanced it on the edge of his ashtray. "Mr. Nemerson," he said, "would you be so kind as to let us know what you're missing this time?"

"*I'm* not missing anything, exactly," Nemerson said, "or at least not something of mine. Believe me, I wouldn't have come here to waste your time with something petty like galoshes or car keys."

"Or an umbrella," Trumbull said.

"What's happened is this: I've been hired by Singleman & Sons, the publishing company, to finish editing Abraham Beard's last, unpublished anthology of science fiction short stories, *Farthest Frontiers*. You know Beard died recently, I assume?"

"I don't even know who he is," Drake said. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Nemerson took a deep breath and a moment to compose his thoughts. "As Manny could tell you, Abraham Beard was a major figure in science fiction publishing. He started as a writer in the pulp magazines back in the forties. He was good, but not great, and, competing with giants like Asimov, Heinlein, and Clarke, he never rose to prominence as a writer. Where he really shone was as an editor, first of a magazine called *Astonishing Science Stories* and then, later, of a line of paperback original novels for Random House. He fell out of sight in the sixties and seventies, when the field became more literary and experimental, but he came back with a vengeance in nineteen seventy-nine when he published an

anthology of new stories called *Far Frontiers.*

"*Far Frontiers* was a landmark, and its publication was one of those milestone moments in the field. Later, everyone talked about 'before *Far Frontiers*' and 'after *Far Frontiers.*' Basically, every top science fiction writer of the time had a story in the book, and the quality of the stories was just staggering. As a writer, Beard may have been just average, but as an editor, he was the best in the business, really able to pull amazing work out of his contributors.

"The publishing business being what it is, you won't be surprised to learn that Beard's publisher quickly commissioned a sequel. And in due course the second book came out, under the name *Farther Frontiers,* and it was every bit as good as the first one—but 'due course' in this case was *ten years.* Beard worked on that book so long that no one believed it would ever be finished. It became a joke in the eighties: If someone asked you how you were doing, you'd say, 'The good news is I sold a story, the bad news is I sold it to *Farther Frontiers.*' When the book finally came out in nineteen eighty-nine, it was a huge event, and part of the reason was that everyone had given up on it—and, frankly, on Beard himself. But he showed everyone. On top of everything else, he'd put one of his own stories in the book, and, okay, it wasn't the best story in the book, but it was better than anything he'd written before and it held its own with stories from some really great writers. And privately everyone figured that's why the book had taken so long, because he was waiting till he'd written a story good enough to include. Which was certainly his privilege, God knows."

Nemerson took a sip of water. "So, the second book came out, and it did great business. It even revived interest in the first book, which was reissued, so the publisher had a double hit on its hands. You can probably guess what happened next: They asked him to edit a third volume. And he agreed. He spread the word throughout the science fiction community that this was going to be the final volume, that he was determined to make it the best of the three, and that he wouldn't release it until he was satisfied that it was, even if it meant waiting till the year two thousand.

"Well, the year two thousand came and went, but no book. We knew he'd bought at least some stories—everyone knew of certain writers who had received contracts and checks from Beard, which they talked about with great pride, knowing that they'd be included when *Farthest Frontiers* finally came out. But it didn't come out. And then six months ago, just after his eighty-second birthday, Beard was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. He fought it for a few weeks and even recovered enough to come home, but a week later he was in the hospital again, and this time he didn't make it.

"The question immediately came up, what was going to happen

with *Farthest Frontiers?* It was all people could talk about. Singleman, the publisher, decided it needed someone to go through his papers and see how close to publishable the book was, so they called me."

"Why you?" Halsted asked. "No offense, but you're a young man, in your thirties. I have to assume there are more experienced editors they could have called on for so important a book."

"I've had a bit of success as a novelist over the past ten years," Nemerson said, "but more, to be frank, as an anthologist. My first collection, *Across the Fourth Dimension,* won the World Fantasy Award for best anthology, and two of the stories in my latest are on the final ballot for the Nebula. I've actually become quite well known as an anthologist. In fact, *Locus* magazine once called me 'the next Abe Beard.'"

"So," Drake said, "was the book publishable?"

"Absolutely. I went through his apartment and turned up manuscripts for fourteen stories he had bought, plus a fifteenth he had written himself, and they were all excellent. Even his—in fact, his was probably one of the two or three best in the book. A few of the older ones he'd bought back in the early nineties had some dated references, but it was nothing I couldn't work with the authors to fix. The earlier volumes had each had sixteen stories, not fifteen, but one less story this time, that's not a big deal. All in all, I was thrilled with what I'd found."

"So what's the problem?" Drake said.

"It's what I didn't find. There were stories by Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke, Roger Zelazny, Samuel Delany, Harlan Ellison, Orson Scott Card, Michael A. Burstein, Octavia Butler, even Kurt Vonnegut, but there was no story by Isaac Asimov."

"So? Maybe he didn't write one," Gonzalo said. "When did Asimov die, Manny? Wasn't it around nineteen ninety?"

"Nineteen ninety-two," Manny said.

"And I remember you telling us he was ill for a while before that. Maybe he just wasn't able to write one."

"But he was," Nemerson said. "I know he was."

"How do you know that?" Drake asked.

"Because Abraham Beard told me."

"I think you know that Isaac was something of a mentor to me," Nemerson said. "He helped me get started when I was just a scrawny, teenaged science fiction fan with dreams of one day being a writer. I wrote him letters, and even though he had no reason to, he wrote back and encouraged me. When I moved to New York to go to college, he took me under his wing, introduced me to some of the editors he knew, helped me get started. He even wrote an introduction for *Across the Fourth Dimension,* and I doubt I could

have sold the book without it.

"When he died, his family held a memorial service, and one of the people who attended the service was Abraham Beard. I introduced myself to him after the ceremony and offered to take him out to dinner. To my delight, he accepted, and we spent a long night at Sardi's, drinking red wine and telling each other our Isaac Asimov stories. They'd met a few years earlier, apparently, on a science fiction-themed cruise they'd both been booked on as guest lecturers, and I believe Beard may have published him once or twice in his *Astonishing* days as well.

"Toward the end of the evening, we started talking about *Farthest Frontiers*. The book was already three years in the making then, and he told me in confidence that he'd only bought a few stories, maybe three or four. But one of the ones he had bought was by Isaac Asimov.

"He wouldn't tell me anything about the story, he was very secretive that way, even after an evening of drinking had loosened his tongue. But he said it was a really good story, in his opinion one of the best Isaac had ever written. Apparently, he had badgered Isaac to write it while they were on the cruise, and Isaac had hidden himself away in his cabin on the last day and emerged the next morning with a novelette, written out in longhand on a pad of legal paper.

"'There's your story,' he told Beard, and handed him the pad with a big smile. Isaac took great pride in being almost super-humanly prolific, and he probably saw Beard's request as a challenge.

"Anyway, that's what Beard told me. You should have seen his eyes when he described getting home, unpacking his bags, reading the story, and realizing that far from being the tossed-off quickie he'd expected, it was—in his words—a story good enough to rival 'Nightfall,' or 'Foundation,' or any of the robot stories. I thought about asking if I could see the story, but I figured he'd say no, and anyway I didn't ask.

"And that was the last I heard of it. The one time Beard and I saw each other after that was at a science fiction convention a few years later. I asked him how *Farthest Frontiers* was coming and he just said, 'I never talk about a work in progress, especially not with the competition.' It wasn't even like he was trying to be nasty, it was just a statement of fact, as if he didn't remember our conversation at all. But I figured he was probably getting some heat from his publisher by then, and I didn't want to press the point.

"I didn't think about the story again until I got the call from Singleman. Naturally, the first thing I did when they put me in touch with Beard's estate was to go to his apartment and look for the manuscript. At first, when I didn't find it, I wasn't worried—I

knew it had to be somewhere, and in the meantime I had fifteen other amazing stories to read. But eventually I was finished reading them and I went through Beard's files and bookshelves a second time. When that didn't work, I tried to think where else he might have put the manuscript for safekeeping—I looked behind the pictures on the walls, I rolled up the rugs, I flipped through the pages of every book in the apartment, I unpacked the closets, I unfolded the man's undershirts and checked behind the toilet tank—I did everything I could think of. And I found some interesting things—for example, a correspondence between Beard and Heinlein from the forties that might make an interesting book in itself. But what I didn't find is what I was looking for: Isaac's story. And it's driving me crazy. First of all, I know Beard would want the story included in the book, and second of all, a new Isaac Asimov story . . . *I* want to read it."

Nemerson stopped and shook his head. "I don't know whether Beard hid it deliberately, in order to keep it safe, or accidentally, as a result of carelessness, but one way or the other it's now missing, and I don't have much time to find it. Singleman wants to move quickly to get *Farthest Frontiers* into stores, and I have to give them something. The question is, where is the story?"

He sat back in his chair and looked at the men around him. For a moment, no one spoke.

Finally, Rubin said, "I knew Isaac pretty well myself, and the part that doesn't sound right to me is his writing in longhand on a legal pad and not keeping a copy when he finished, especially if the story came out as well as Beard said. All right, he was on a ship, and he had to make do with the materials at hand—but wouldn't he at least have asked Beard to send the story back to him later so he could make a copy for his records? I suppose one possibility is that he did ask for the story back, and then maybe he just never returned it to Beard for some reason, accounting for why the manuscript is now missing."

"No," Nemerson said. "I've been through Isaac's records, even the papers he sent to be archived at Boston University, and there's no manuscript that fits the description. Besides, even if Isaac had asked to get a copy back, Beard wouldn't have sent him the original, he'd have sent a copy. Or if he had sent the original, he'd have kept a copy. Either way, there would still be a copy of some sort for me to find at Beard's apartment."

Avalon made a tent of his fingers and tapped them against his chin. "Tell me something. You said that Singleman put you in touch with Beard's estate. I assume if it had been a relative of Beard's you met with, you would have said they put you in touch with Beard's wife, or his brother, or his daughter, or whomever, but

not his 'estate.' So can we conclude that the person you met with was a lawyer?"

"That's right," Nemerson said. "Beard was an only child and never married. His lawyer said he had no living relatives."

Avalon went on in his solemn baritone. "In a case where an author is represented after his death solely by an attorney and there are no clear inheritors, it is not uncommon for intellectual-property assets to be frozen and held in escrow pending a determination as to their value, ownership, and proper disposition. The assignment you undertook for his publisher could be an example of such a determination process. Isn't it possible that the story you're looking for is in the lawyer's possession?"

"I'm afraid not," Nemerson said. "Beard's lawyer gave me access to all materials in his possession. There wasn't much, and the story wasn't there. Just to be sure, I described exactly what I was looking for, and the lawyer said he'd never seen it."

Halsted raised a hand. "When we were talking earlier, Geoff mentioned the idea of storing valuables in a safe-deposit box. Surely Beard would have considered the Asimov manuscript one of his most valuable possessions. Have you checked whether he had a safe-deposit box?"

"He had two," Nemerson said, "and I arranged to have both opened. We found some stock certificates, a few photos of his parents, his passport, and his social security card—but no story."

"How thorough was your search of his apartment?" Gonzalo asked. "You say you went through all his books, for instance, but did you look at the undersides of his shelves? Did you move the bookshelves away from the walls? Did you look under the wall-paper?"

"There's no wallpaper, just paint," Nemerson said, "but yes, I did check under the shelves. And not only the shelves—I checked under his TV set, under his computer, under his mattress. I even unscrewed all the electrical outlets to see if any of them were fakes. I was extremely thorough. I think I've made it clear to you just how important it is to me that I find this story, and I promise I searched every place in the apartment that might possibly be large enough to hold a manuscript."

"Even the lighting fixtures?" Gonzalo said.

"Even the paper towel tube in the kitchen. Even the *flour bin* in the kitchen."

"Even the refrigerator?" Trumbull asked.

"*Especially* the refrigerator."

"Hold on. There's something all of us are overlooking," Trumbull said. "Maybe Asimov wrote the story longhand because a pen and a pad of paper were all he had to work with on board the ship, but there's no publisher that would accept the story that way when the time came to submit the book. I don't care if you're Isaac Asi-

mov, I don't care if you're Stephen King, you can't turn in a handwritten manuscript. That means that at some point Beard would have had to type the story into his computer in order to print out a copy he could submit. What if he typed it in, but never got around to printing it out?"

"The original manuscript would still have to be somewhere," Rubin said. "It's not like he'd throw it out."

"Probably not, but who knows?" Trumbull said. "Maybe he did. Or maybe he lost it. Or maybe it's still somewhere in his apartment despite all of Gary's efforts to turn it up. But it doesn't matter. Gary doesn't need to find the manuscript, he just needs to find the story. If an electronic copy exists, he's got what he needs."

"I wish it were that simple," Nemerson said. "I checked the computer. The only stories on it were Beard's own work. Other than the one for *Farthest Frontiers,* they were either stories he'd already published or unfinished fragments a page or two long."

"Did you check every file? Even encrypted ones?"

Nemerson nodded. "Beard wasn't exactly what you'd call a power user of the computer. He only had word-processor documents, and not a lot of them. And nothing was encrypted." He looked around the table. "Does anyone else have any ideas?"

"I have one," Avalon said, "but you're not going to like it."

"What?"

"If there is literally no trace of the story and you're sure you've searched everywhere it might be, you've got to consider the possibility that the story never existed in the first place. Think about it—as far as we know, you are the only person who has ever heard of this story, and the only reason you think it exists is because Beard told you about it at the end of a long night of drinking following a memorial service that must have been traumatic for both of you. Maybe he desperately wished he'd gotten a story from Asimov and was shaken by the realization that now it was too late. His subconscious converted his desire into a fantasy that he *had* gotten a story, and maybe because he'd had a few too many drinks that night, he was temporarily unable to distinguish fantasy from reality."

"I don't buy it," Nemerson said. "We'd been drinking, and maybe that had something to do with why he told me about the story that night and why he didn't remember telling me about it later, but it's not as if we'd reached the point of seeing pink elephants. When he talked about the story, everything he said was very concrete, very specific. All the details about the circumstances of the cruise, for instance—it's true that Isaac was on the cruise, I've checked that. Isaac's wife even remembers him staying in their cabin on the last day to write something, although she didn't remember what it was. No, I'm confident Isaac really did write a story for *Farthest Frontiers* and that there's a copy somewhere in Beard's

apartment—I just can't figure out where."

Nemerson glanced around the table, but no one said anything.

"I'm sorry to say we don't seem to be able to help you this time," Trumbull said.

Nemerson sighed. "Well, I appreciate your trying. Maybe I'll do one more search of the apartment, top to bottom, but if that doesn't work—"

"I'm not sure that will be necessary, sir." Henry stepped away from the sideboard, where he had been listening quietly.

"Do you have an idea, Henry?" said Nemerson.

"I do," Henry said. "I am somewhat reluctant to share it with you, because I am not certain it is correct and its implications are rather serious—but the more I hear you gentlemen talk about the situation, the more likely it seems."

"Spit it out, Henry," Rubin said.

"I don't think Mr. Nemerson needs to search any further for the missing story," Henry said, "for the simple reason that I suspect he has already found it."

"I don't understand," Nemerson said.

"You found fifteen stories in Beard's apartment," Henry said, "including one you described as having been written by Beard himself. I believe that is the story you are looking for."

"Impossible!" Nemerson said.

"Consider," Henry said. "The only reason you thought that story was written by Beard is presumably because his name appeared on the manuscript. But as Mr. Trumbull pointed out earlier, Beard would have had to retype Asimov's story at some point before submitting the anthology to his publisher, and it's a trivial matter to type 'Abraham Beard' on the first page instead of 'Isaac Asimov.' Of course, it is only trivial mechanically—ethically, it's an exceptionally severe offense, perhaps the worst an editor could commit against one of his own authors, particularly one who, posthumously, could no longer defend himself.

"But think about what you have told us. Here is a man who started as a writer side by side with Isaac Asimov, writing for the same publications, but who never achieved more than a fraction of the recognition or success. Such recognition as he did achieve was as an editor, not as a writer, and didn't extend beyond the rather limited world of science fiction publishing. We know he never gave up his desire to achieve success as a writer. It is widely believed that he delayed publication of his second anthology, possibly for years, while he worked on a story of his own to include. We know his third anthology, which given his age and poor health he must have realized would be his last, had already taken even longer to prepare than the second, and from the evidence of the files you

found on his computer, it may well have been for the same reason. After all, he had already purchased fifteen stories for the book, if you count the Asimov story and the other fourteen you found—all that was left was for him to complete his own story, and he'd have had the sixteen stories he needed and been done. If he *had* finished a story of his own, especially one as good as the one you described, surely he would have wasted no time in submitting the book to his publisher. The fact that he didn't submit it makes me suspicious that the story with his name on it was not actually his work.

"I imagine that he tried to write a story—he may well have tried for years. But all you found were fragments of a page or two in length, so apparently he wasn't able to do it. When he came out of the hospital for the last time, he may well have known it was the last time. And as he sat at the computer, trying desperately to produce a story good enough to include in his last book, surely he must have been haunted by the memory of Isaac Asimov, one of the most prolific authors in American history, stepping into a cruise ship cabin one morning and emerging the next day with a finished novelette. And not just any novelette—a great novelette, one good enough to appear in *Farthest Frontiers.*"

Henry walked to the foot of the table and fixed Nemerson with a penetrating stare. "You're thirty-two years old, Mr. Nemerson, you're married, you've had some success in your chosen field, and you have practically your whole life ahead of you. But try to imagine what it would be like if you were eighty-two, and dying, and quite possibly a failure in your own eyes, and you saw only one last chance to save your reputation. Maybe the only way you could do so was degrading and despicable—but it was there, it was an available option. And who would ever know? He had the only copy of Asimov's story that existed; he could retype it, destroy the original, and no one would be the wiser. And perhaps he asked himself, who would be hurt? Isaac Asimov, who already had more than four hundred books and countless awards to his name?

"What he did, assuming that he did actually do it, was inexcusable. The act I suspect him of is deeply dishonest, and even if it were true that it hurt no one, which I do not believe, it would still be wrong in every way. But I do not agree that it is impossible."

"No," Nemerson said, "I suppose it's not impossible."

"Gary, you mentioned that Beard didn't appear to be a sophisticated computer user," Trumbull said. "If that's so, he probably didn't know that many word processors automatically save a backup copy each time you modify a document. If he ever typed the story in with Asimov's name on it and only later changed it to his own, you might be able to find an archived backup that shows the original version."

"You can do better than that," Drake said. "I can put you in touch

with some researchers at Columbia who have devised statistical techniques to analyze a piece of text and determine how likely it is to be the work of a given writer. You might remember the case, several years back, where this technique was used to unmask the anonymous author of *Primary Colors,* the political *roman à clef.* You can provide plenty of samples of both Asimov's and Beard's work, so it should be a simple matter to run the analysis."

"And it is possible that this analysis will show that I am wrong," Henry said. "If so, I apologize sincerely. But I am afraid this is the explanation that makes the most sense to me."

"Yes, I guess it does to me, too," Nemerson said, "now that you've walked us through it. But I just can't believe he would do it. How could he?"

"It may give you some measure of comfort," Henry said, "to remind yourself that he didn't actually carry the plan out to completion. He never submitted the manuscript in its current form. Perhaps he was just entertaining the idea in a moment of despair, and if he had survived his illness, perhaps he would have changed the name on the story back and spent a few more years working on a story of his own. And perhaps in time he'd have written one, and perhaps it would have been good."

"I don't know," Nemerson said. "Do you really think he deserves the benefit of the doubt?"

"We all do," Henry said. ●

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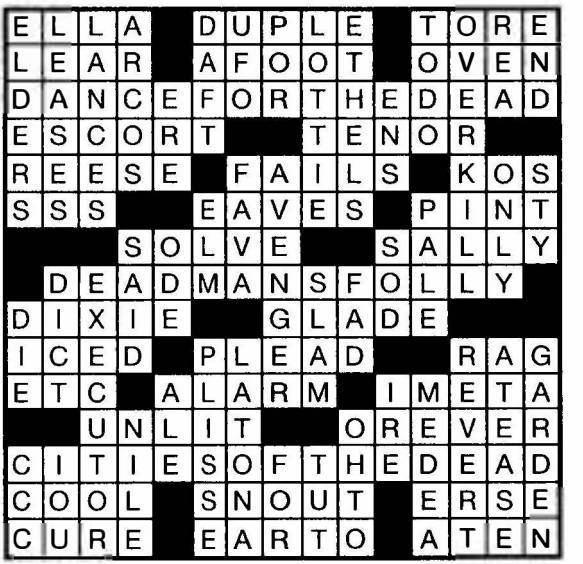

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